

New England Suite

by Lewis Gesner

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Tom Todd and Jimmy

Jimmy's moving around so much that he gets in the way when I throw an apple as hard as I can. I beam him square in the forehead from twenty feet and the apple just explodes. I see him get red before he can even cry, and me and Tom are laughing when he comes out of it and screams. He runs holding his noggin. "He's gonna have a headache!"

"And a knot on his head!" We laugh more 'cause Jimmy is still running, up the side of the road screaming. Tom knows I done it on purpose. But if Jimmy's dad asks, I know Tom will say Jimmy got in the way. I was aiming for the tree it falled from. That'll be our story. Funny, stuff always happens to Jimmy. But, that's his purpose.

"What a baby." I wait 'til he's way up the road and then yell. "Hey, Jimmy, I'm sorry! Come back. Hey, Jimmy. I said I'm sorry!" Jimmy stops and turns. "I can't believe it," I say to Tom. "He thinks I'm sorry." Sure enough, he comes running back from way the hell up the road.

"You're so smart, waiting 'til he was almost gone, just to make him run himself out." Tom knows how I think.

"Now the kicker, we hide or run off ourselves. How 'bout we cut through the woods different ways. We both holler for him to catch up. Then cut off the path and meet at the cemetery gate. Maybe we make him have an asthma attack." I always have ideas.

"Okay. Best run, he sees us now."

Me and Tom go on opposite sides of the road. There are some paths here, we won't get lost, but maybe Jimmy will, he's so fucked up. Tom can cut across

the road a ways up, and I'll go along the logging road out here and then out through Colter's field to the church, and then the cemetery. "Hey Jimmy, gotta catch up, we're chasing a porcupine! Quick Tom, the porcupine!" And then I hear Tom in the distance, he's so quick to pick it up,

"Jimmy, over here, the porcupine! We gotta tree it! I see it! Jimmy, hurry sos you can hit it too!"

This is always fun as shit, doing this stuff to Jimmy. And I can't believe he don't catch on. Man, if I was fat with asthma like that I'd take dad's shotgun and blow my head off. I'm running hard now through the woods, that's when I always start thinking about stuff. Like how I thought about shooting my head off if I was like Jimmy, and then I think about Jay Field who did do that, but he wasn't like Jimmy or even me. He was the opposite, but his family was like Jimmy in some way, fucked up drunk, stupid.

The older kids say Jay was wicked smart and got almost all 'A's in school. He lived with Marshal, his brother in the trailer next to the dump. Marshal tended the garbage and fires, wore a stinking poncho and sometimes talked aloud to no one there. His dad lived in the trailer sometimes. Some says his daddy drank a lot when Marshal was born and more important his mom was drinking when she was carrying. I seen her before she died, and I think even then she was ugly, and Jay's dad must have been drunk to stick it in her.

"Hey Jimmy, catch up, I got a good one off on the porcupine! Come and hit it!" I can't hear Tom, but I know he's doing his part. Jimmy's so fun to fuck around, Jay wasn't even fun, always moping around. At school he was in the library club, that was for losers. He was doing good, but I think he was scared to have to go to school after, like college. He stole a shotgun and some shells from

True Hardware on the peninsula. The Chase kids found him in the woods, he'd been dead and missing for days. He just had a stump for a head and it was all caked with leaves. I was at Deputy Minzy's house setting off firecrackers in the shed with David when his dad got a radio call to come look at this body. No one figured Jay broke into True Hardware. They figured it was Stoney or Steve Benner, but Jay was the smart one in his family, he was going to go to school. Turned out he was just like the rest of them, he was just a thief and a bum. We couldn't have fucked around with him much. He wouldn't have been no fun. The thing with Jimmy is, that he always comes back, you can do anything to him. "Hey Jimmy, you better catch up!"

Like I was just thinking, about two things we did to him. Now I can't help it, I have to stop running for a minute and laugh. Me and Tom and Jimmy went camping in Tom's tent, just out in the woods behind the church. When we get in for the night, I got my flashlight on. Me and Tom start talking about when we seen Tom's sister and her friend naked in the morning after they had a sleep-over, and we're making it all up, but that lets us make it all the more juicy. Like, Tom's sister, Deb, is rubbing her own tits, while Jane is over near the crack in the door we're looking through like she knows we're there, and she's parting her lips down there so we can see her pink insides through the crack.

Then Tom and me say we gotta get sleep, so I turn out the flashlight. In a few minutes I say surprise and put the light on. Jimmy has it out and he's whacking it like a loony. Tom takes his porcupine club from beside his sleeping bag and swings it at Jimmy's pecker. There's like a snapping sound, and we can see Jimmy's pecker folds over the porcupine club like a napkin. He screamed. And he didn't stop. He whimpered all night, and then ran home in the morning. We never heard nothing about

it, so he never told, but that's no surprise. He's so shy about his parts. Once after that, we was at Tom's house and we found a projector and some movies in his parent's bedroom closet while they was out. We set it up and watched the movies, and they was naked women and men doing it to them. Then there was a woman putting a peeled banana inside her and letting her dog lick it out. I got all hard, and I could tell Tom was too. But Jimmy was there in his shorts, and he didn't have it happening to him at all. I think Tom broke it when he hit it that night in the tent. When we thought that, it was even more funny to Tom and me.

And then there was the time we got Jimmy to pick up a dollar we said we saw at the bee hives the Bly brothers was trying to keep up behind their house. When Jimmy got next to the hives, we threw big rocks and knocked two of them over. Jimmy got stung all over and we watched from the road like we was at some kind of drive-in movie. He was sick at home for a week. He said he fell on the hives and he apologized to the Blys for damaging them. They didn't want any trouble, they're old hippies. They're probably happy no one says nothing about the pot plants they got growing up back there. The thing is, Jimmy don't want to lose us to hang around with. If he tells, and we get in trouble, he's history to us. Friends like him don't grow on trees. You gotta pick 'em before their ripe, and keep pushing them, pushing, a little harder and farther every time you want to have your fun. In the end, you got someone you can do anything to and they'll take it.

And there, I hear Tom, he must have crossed the road and come around toward Colter's field. I make like we got the porcupine on the run. "Over this way, Tom, the critter is right in front of me." I'm getting all scratched up though, and I haven't heard Jimmy yet. I know he wouldn't have gone home. He's starting

to piss me off. "Tom! Come find me! He ain't following us." I stay put, and in a few minutes, Tom comes from in front of me.

"How'd he get passed us?" Tom asks.

"You came around so he must be on the other side of the road, or behind me on this side," I say.

"You lost him, Todd?"

"You lost him."

"I bet he followed you." Tom starts walking back the way I came. "He's so fat, he's probably sitting down."

We walk for a half mile, poking off this way and that. Then I see a gleam of white on the ground. "Look," I say, "I found his atomizer! He can't be far! Hey, Jimmy!"

"Gimme that," Tom says and snatches it away. I know he's going to do something rude. "Wait 'til he tries this," he says, unbottling the top, pouring out the medicine and pissing in it.

"Hey Jimmy!" I yell. I'm getting bored with this. Me and Tom look around, we follow my path all the way back. He's convinced Jimmy followed me.

He's right I guess, and Tom knows it, that Jimmy don't trust him. What ever.

So he follows me, and here he is, we go all the way back and then turn around and find him about half way off to the side, he's wearing a brown shirt so we miss it the first time blending in with the leaves. He's turning blue. Fucking blue! What a shit head. And gasping for air. Then we see he's having an attack, a asthma attack. Tom gives him the atomizer which he grabs but so feeble that he drops it and Tom has to pick it up and put it back into Jimmy's hand. I catch Tom's eye and he almost laughs but holds it in. Jimmy puts the atomizer

in his mouth and he squirts it in a panic to breathe. Then he gets big-eyed and pukes right away. He pukes and then he rolls over and really turns blue. We laugh but then it isn't funny so we run off.

Kids like Jimmy you're doing a favor, letting them hang around you. What they gonna do otherwise, join the library club at school? They take what you dish out 'cause they'd rather be with buddies than be with other fuck-ups or like Crispy Critter, who got his skin burned in a house fire. He's in the library club at school. Nope, Jimmy made up his own mind. But when someone like Jimmy isn't funny anymore, you gotta cut him loose, and go find another one. That's why Jimmy's out there in the woods now, and we're all fancy free, me and Tom bustin' gravestones in the cemetery. And tomorrow we're gonna go get all friendly with ol' Crispy, on account he don't have no friends and he'd like to be ours.

Church Hill

In Augusta, Maine there's a place known as Church Hill, with a bank, a parking lot, and a church at its top. It is a low rent part of town. There are no movie theaters, no restaurants, and no malls there. There are two small grocers and a liquor store. Vagrants and runaways hang around in groups in the parking lot while laborers and laborer's wives stay inside their paneled apartments and try to fend off the next day, and keep the night air alive with the sounds of their fighting. Church Hill is also home to a fair number of students who attend the nearby Community College. Though they have popular programs in music, art, law enforcement and liberal arts, they offer only a two year associates degree through open enrollment. However well deserving, students here come from poor backgrounds or are such that couldn't cut the grade at another school. There are no dorms. Students live in what housing they can find.

The houses at the top of Church Hill have been chopped up into apartments. A three floor house will generally yield six apartments, equal cubes with uniform paneling and perhaps a furnished table and a swivel chair. Students who can't commute crowd Church Hill because it is cheap and a walk to the school. They compete with the locals for limited space.

There is a large state mental institution at the other end of Augusta. Holding a predictable number of criminals, locals, and the poor with no where else to be, the institution having its own open enrollment, the state institution like the state school. After suitable rehabilitation, people are released on an out-patient basis. This is an ideal description. Unlike the state school, many of the patients at the institution are inmates; they are there instead of in jail. What this makes is a situation where there is always overcrowding. Rehabilitation is relative

then to space requirements. The more need for space there is, the more easily people are rehabilitated and are sent back out into the community. These people too swarm into the low rent housing of Church Hill. Landlords look ambivalently on this; on the one hand, these outpatients frequently cause trouble. One year two apartment houses went up in flames traced to mattresses set on fire by angry lovers, in both cases, graduates of the state institution. On the other hand, apartments for these outpatients are got with the help of the institution, and hence state funded; rent is guaranteed.

The homeless population also converges on Church Hill. The homeless here tend to be young. Older homeless, those having earned the title of Hobo from the living of this life, as well as the recently evicted old, tend to steer away from company, the hobo from suspicion learned over years of having to read people, and the newly homeless old from shame or a sense of worthlessness. The old seek residence by the river or on the unpeopled stretches of railroad tracks that pass through Augusta. Church Hill is compressed. The homeless that converge there form gangs. They are petty thieves, runaways, and laborers that don't make enough to afford a rent, or drink their checks as soon as they get them. They find solace and humor in each other's company. They still yearn to be a part of something, and this makeshift organization awkwardly fills that need.

These groupings, the insane, the homeless, the workers and the students are of course not completely distinct. Some of the homeless are insane, outpatients frequently go to the school, and students may graduate to the mental institution or the street. While sharing a somewhat homogenous existence of possible social movement here on the hill, there are still airs that mark where each person is right now; it can be smelled, seen in the sheen or cultivation of

the hair or the degree of spontaneous thought revealed in the eyes. Everyone reads everyone else as they pass by and lock glances in the liquor store. The subtleties of such looking go beyond the observable and enter into the imaginable. Influences come from within and without. Church Hill, or any hill, a mound, a burial mound, with its wafts and drifts of spirits, all dream their dwellers and live their lives, a book that is a place and a climate, a time and living things awake and asleep.

Jeff and Todd stood on the apartment porch and drank beer. Budweiser was their choice, cheap and good mixed with tomato juice, a taste Jeff had acquired picking apples one summer in the mid-west. It made him stand out a little too, which he liked. Todd took it on himself when he saw how Jeff used it to strike up conversations with females at a party. Jeff's plans always involved attention getting, and Todd was a quick learn. He didn't mind being a student to Jeff's natural teaching. The fact was that Jeff's maneuvers and displays usually worked to some advantage. Once on a weekend they'd both gotten drunk on Peak's Island, a dot of land in Portland Harbor. They'd both passed out on the beach and the very next morning, hung over and sick waiting near the dock for a ferry to the mainland, Todd had spied a breasty young girl, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old walking by in shorts and flipping her long blond hair as if she knew she was always being watched. He immediately evaluated her from a distance and, running his hands through his hair and making his best James Dean pose, said loudly, "Isn't it amazing when you wake up with a hangover and have a throbbing hard-on in your pants?"

"Todd didn't know what to say. "Well,... I..." and then he saw that the girl had made a u turn and in a moment was in the little waiting shack

on the dock with him and Jeff.

“Are you from around here?” she asked Jeff coyly, her thumb thrust into the left pocket of her shorts, tugging them low to reveal the tops of her panties.

Todd swallowed with some difficulty and looked. She didn’t even notice he was there. He knew the party was over for him. He took the ferry back to the mainland while Jeff stayed. But he was impressed. And he learned. Jeff knew his shit.

Jeff knew his shit. With his thin nose, narrow mouth and close together, deeply set eyes, it was as if his senses were pinching toward each other, squeezing into a single sense to direct toward the realization of whatever end his person might be put, though these ends were usually gratification of his body. Yet this was a variety of ambition that Todd respected and wanted to emulate.

Jeff opened another bottle of Budweiser, poured half of it into a glass, and then filled the rest of it with tomato juice from a can. He chugged it down without stirring. “There’s a guy who sells paintings from a trailer by the roadside in Boothbay,” he said, “who thins out his paints with beer as a medium. His paintings are shit, landscapes from his head he does in twenty minutes. But he sells them. His trailer is full of racks of paintings. He says he has over five thousand paintings in there. He drinks beer constantly. I think he’s a wicked drunk.” Jeff paused to mix some more Redeye. “I want to paint like that. Not paintings like his, but like a machine, out of my head, mystical things, coming out of the smudge marks.” Jeff had a painting teacher at the College who painted imaginative images rising out of the irregularities of loosely applied paints, tracked around the canvas with a wide brush and

a putty knife. He relied heavily on National Geographic magazine for his exotic imagery that he suggested to viewers were from deep in his subconscious. Jeff liked that idea, drawing out from some bottomless well. It sounded good. He just wouldn't leave magazines laying around for people to see.

Todd looked thoughtful as he made himself a Redeye. "Its like with late romantic German writing. I'd like to do that in some way, too." He struggled for a thought to clarify itself. "The idea that there is a living sleep, a connecting dream in all things..." He wasn't sure but he thought it sounded good. He should write it down.

"Yes, yes..." Jeff became animated. "We're the taps, we're the spigots, the channels for another world beside our own.." he often found the vaguest things were the clearest for him. "We're out of tomato juice."

"Fuck." Todd pulled money out of his pockets and counted it. "I think we're okay." He quickly calculated equivalence of money in alcohol. "We're going to be wasted tomorrow."

"Yeah, whatever." Jeff counted his own money. "I don't know how, but we're more than set. I just got a check from ol' lady Miller. If she kicks it I might get a bunch all at once." This was extreme hopeful and not a little unrealistic. Mrs. Miller had helped some people financially out on a peninsula where she had her summer home. It was not entirely altruistic. Summer people's homes tended to be vandalized and even destroyed by local youth. If she helped in a few kids education here and there it was a kind of home owner's insurance. She wouldn't have liked being thought of as an old bag and death warmed over by those like Jeff, who profited from her. But it was a stretch to

think she might remember these wharf-rats in a will. Jeff knew this secretly. But it made him feel bigger to think he had a patron, and even better, an inheritance. "Lets stock up." Todd handed Jeff his money as they walked next door to the liquor store.

They went to the case where they had all the domestic beer. It was cheap enough. The beer on sale was all stacked on the floor, warm as piss. Sometimes Jeff wished he could think ahead, but the drinking was always at the last minute, not even a thing he liked to plan. So they paid a little more. The girl stocking the refrigerator caught Jeff's eye. "Hi" he said with a measured sheepishness.

"Hello." she said. "What are you boys doing tonight?" Her eyes straddled Jeff, but Todd noticed she also looked briefly at him.

"We're over on my porch next door drinking a few Redeyes," Todd blurted out before Jeff could speak. "Would you like to join us?" Jeff receded as Todd took the lead.

"What are Redeyes?" she asked honestly.

"Most people around here have never heard of them," Todd baited, but I'd love to turn you on to them. I just need a couple of cans of tomato juice with this beer..." he quickly pulled two six-packs out of the refrigerator in front of him.

She smiled at his enthusiasm. "Juice is on the bottom." She squatted down to take out two cans and lingered for a moment too long, to express her subservient positioning in from of Todd, quickly running her eyes up the length of his body in case he missed it. "Here you go." She stacked the cans on top of the beer he carried against his chest so that he had to hold onto them with

his chin, reversing their roles like foreplay. "Maybe I'll be over after we close," she half whispered to Todd as she turned on her heels and disappeared into the back of the store.

Jeff and Todd stood on the porch resuming their drinking. "She's a townie you know," Jeff said to Todd. "They're okay if you can use them or control them. But don't let one of them get the upper hand." Todd knew this was true. He could tell by the way she talked that she was a townie. She had that dumb drawl and way of talking in half sentences. Maybe she didn't finish high school and probably she'd already had kids. She'd walked by the porch a couple of times before and had stopped to talk a little. Always something like "Yup. Tired. Going home now. Sure hot out." Yet always with just a touch of flirtation. Tonight it seemed different. Maybe she had a fight with her boyfriend and she wanted to get back. Maybe stay out late. Maybe all night. That was it. That was the kind of trouble townies could bring, Todd thought. Some guy gunning for him was all he needed.

"But I guess you might as well fuck her if you can," Jeff said.

Todd felt a little defensive. Maybe she was nice, she was pretty enough, maybe she was different than other townies. But Todd caught himself and returned to his thoughts of only seconds before. "What if she's just going to turn around and rob me, or she's got a dumb-fuck boyfriend?"

Jeff laughed and pushed his hair back. "I guess we'll just do what we always do. We'll deal with whatever happens. It will be an adventure." Jeff knew there was no argument to this. This was a philosophy, a style. They had risen above, they were the great experimenters. Nothing came close to them that they didn't invite or couldn't push away whenever they wanted.

“Some things are just true,” Todd said reassuringly to himself, but outloud. “Maybe I can...” he thought what he could do that would be in the spirit of their natures. “maybe I can tape record her without her knowing it. I can... sort of ask her questions, about what she thinks about, I don’t know, God, art, that kind of thing...”

Jeff elaborated. “Tape her screwing. Make her talk then. We can cut up the tape after and make sound art.”

“Like John Cage!” Todd was starting to get in the spirit.

“Right! Exactly! We can make collages and blast it out of speakers from your windows!” Now they had a project. “I can use this for a final piece in one of my classes!” Jeff envisioned himself reveling in the praise he would receive from his instructor at this realer than real chunk of life as art.

Todd drew back a bit. “I want to get some credit too...”

Her name was Sally. She finished work at eleven and was on the porch at eleven twenty. Todd couldn’t help but be overcome by her just a bit. He looked at her mouth as she opened it to speak, the words coming out, simple sounds, passing by him as if he were deaf, her lips curled slightly at either end, light and pink supple and evenly toned, a slight moist gloss on them, and hard to place on any movie star, or acquaintance, and hard to couple with any other face. Her eyes were very round with brown irises and eye whites like milk, her skin an ivory cream transcending the limitations of any harsh liquor store lights or the dim quartz bulb and moth shadows of the porch with a radiance all her own. The lilt of her voice slowly faded into his consciousness after what seemed an eternity of ogling her.

“I should go home but I want to do what I want to do,” she said. “Can I have one of them drinks?”

Todd popped open a bottle poured two thirds of it in a glass and topped it off with tomato juice. "You gotta drink it straight down," he said. That's how to drink them."

Sally chugged her drink back and held out her glass. "That's good." Todd filled her glass again and watched her down the second just as quickly.

"I'm going home," Jeff said. "have a good night," taking two beers in his pockets and opening a third for the walk. Jeff lived on the second floor of the apartment building, directly above Todd. He made a quick head nodding motion as he passed Todd, a manner that said both "take her inside" and "later."

"Well." Todd poured Sally another drink. "You must be happy to be off work for the night, huh?"

Sally smiled. "Its not so bad. I've had worse jobs. Its not like working in a factory or nothing." She was quiet and sipped her drink for a moment. "You get to meet some nice people. Then of course there's the drunks you feel bad for."

Todd felt self conscious. Was he one of the nice people or one of the drunks? He thought about how much he went there. Maybe it was time to spread his buying around a little. "You' re very pretty," he blurted out to change the subject.

Later inside his apartment he kissed her. She seemed nervous at first but gave in to him with only a little resistance. She smelled so clean, soap and water and the smell of her arousal as he explored her ivory body. Her breast were soft and seemed like those that had nursed, her hips suggested birth and generation. There was some moment in lovemaking when Todd was always struck dumb. Women seemed so much older and

perhaps made superior to men; they contained in them all the potential of both of the sexes. This thankfully passed like a wave or heart beat; any longer would have disturbed the flow that everyone hopes to sustain at these times. The only thing that stopped Todd was the nagging memory of his mission. Excusing himself to use the bathroom, Todd snuck into the next room and clicked the power switch on his tape recorder, covered it with some newspaper and trailing the microphone along the floor to the corner of the bedroom door.

Todd held back at the same time that he tried to appear to let go. Maybe Sally would think he was always like this, he thought. At the back of his mind was his tape recording. He was louder than he needed to be. He was worried about dead air time. As soon as he had tape rolling, everything had change. Sally stopped being the living embodiment of woman he had mused of to himself. She had become mechanically exactly what she was; an animal of a species incidentally a member of his own and engaged in a reproductive act which nature made pleasant just so they could do such deceptive dances, to assure their own replacement and to punctuate their lives of strict survival with short, bodily epiphanies. Sally didn't feel this, only a twinge of self deprecation, perhaps at her own inability to compel Todd to a higher passion. It was Todd alone who sensed the degradation he had brought on himself.

Sally lay on her back while Todd propped himself up on his elbows in the dark bedroom. "What do you expect from your life?" he asked her.

"Oh. Um, things. Things but not stuff. You know what I mean?"

Todd nodded. He hoped she was speaking loud enough for his tape machine

to pick up. He tried to think of other questions, or how else he might lead her on to say interesting things.

Sally never went to sleep. She dressed sometime before dawn and left the apartment to go home on foot. Todd didn't insist on walking her home and she didn't ask. The tape on his recorder had reached the end of the reel and shut itself off. Todd got up, put on a light and rewound the tape. He hoped he'd gotten some, or any of the night before. It was such good stuff.

There was a banging at the door. Todd woke up. He'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table with his tape machine. What a harvest! Jeff walked through the unlocked front door and pulled up a chair. "Just wait 'til you hear this," Todd said. He lined up the reel and began the tape. There were things he didn't even remember, noises, guttural throaty sounds, and those questions, personal, prying, finally bringing Sally to tears as childhood and daddy and boyfriends and babies all mixed into one overwhelming lump. The thing was, listening to it now, it didn't seem at all interesting. In fact, it sounded boring, like a litany of unrelated blurbs of words and complaints. Beer just made everything special, Todd thought.

"I suppose we can make something out of it," Jeff said skeptically. "The talking is just useless. She must be an idiot." He put his head on his chin. "Maybe some of the sex noises might be fun to make tape loops out of or something."

Todd felt disappointed in himself. His second best to begin with had fizzled out into nothing at all. What a waste of time it all was. "What a waste of time it all is," he said out loud.

It was Saturday. Jeff sat around until afternoon and then they began

to drink beer. It took the edge off of their hangovers. Todd was already thinking about being at work on Monday, and the three classes he had to prepare for during the week. Todd knew he had to work to get things done. Jeff was different. Jeff was talented. Or at least his teachers let him get by on that. He was always doing work for his art classes at the last minute, sometimes in the hallway minutes before it was due. And he always got the grades. And then there was the business with Mrs. Miller. Jeff came from nothing. His mother worked at a shoe factory, his father left home before Jeff could remember, but he'd never had to work. The great Mrs. Miller had intervened and saved Jeff from that by sprinkling just enough his way, as she did with others deemed pathetic enough to draw up, others who hated her too, others she could drop when she lost interest, or died.

So Jeff just needed to nurse his hangover. When their beer was gone, Todd stepped over to the liquor store to buy another six. The store owner looked at him with his familiar blank face that could say what ever a customer thought of himself. Right now, this blank face said "Drunk." Todd wished it said anything but that right now, student, or laborer, or stranger. But drunk hurt him. The owners face was remarkably blank today. As he bought his six pack of Budweiser, Todd noticed that Sally wasn't there. He'd better just let it pass. To ask might be bad.

It was later in the day and Todd and Jeff had finished off the rest of their beer and then some. The person in the third floor of their apartment building was away; his car had been gone for two days. The front door keys to all three apartments was the same, so Todd and Jeff went into the neighbor's apartment and poured off a quart of gin from a bottle, replacing it with water.

They were high when they saw a police car pull up to the liquor store and two big cops go inside. Todd had a bad feeling.

It was the next morning when Todd found out. He went into the nearby grocer's to pick up a Sunday paper and overheard the butcher talking to a customer about the girl who had been found floating in the river. She hadn't gone home after work two nights before. They talked like they knew her. Todd wanted to ask who she was, but he didn't. It might not be a good idea to know her. If he did. But he was pretty sure.

Todd was glad no one came to his door. No one asked anything, no one bothered him. It just went away. Sally wasn't at the liquor store anymore, that's what he knew.

It came up with Jeff, but they didn't dwell on it. "See what can happen with townies?" is what Jeff said. He was also relieved that they weren't asked about anything. Todd went to work that Monday and got his school work done, and Jeff occupied his time in whatever way he usually did. In no time the incident was of no concern.

One night, Todd and Jeff discovered a plywood board that could be pulled away from the side of the building at the back of the liquor store. There was a hole underneath it that opened into the basement, big enough for them to squeeze through. Getting a flashlight, they went into the building and judiciously stole the least conspicuous bottles of alcohol and beer. Loading up their refrigerators, they embarked on a mellow weekend bender.

They drank and smoked Marlboros, sitting at the kitchen table and

simply relishing the substances of alcohol and tobacco and how it made them feel. As time passed, they pulled out Todd's tape machine and recorded each other started and finishing each other's words. It was a silly amusement, but they were entering such a state that it seem like high comedy, a revealing and unique art only they could appreciate. And then when this had lost its charm, Todd pulled out the reel of tape he had simply labeled "dead one." He held it in his hand for a moment like he had broken a law or had been caught with masturbating. But the sensation was gone by the time Todd had the tape looped on the machine.

The sounds on the tape hadn't changed. There were the guttural noises, sounds of lovemaking and the conversations, not so boring this time, but filled with an irony and absurdity that spontaneously appealed to both of them at the same time, and they broke into long, uncontrolled laughter.

"Oh my god, what a stupid cunt!" Jeff roared. I can't believe this shit!"

"Hold on, hold on a minute," Todd stammered through tears, "you got to hear this part here..." he ran the tape forward and punched play. "She was really drunk here. Listen."

"I don't feel like I ever done anything good. I was in high school and I gave it up. I was married and I gave it. I had a baby and I gave it up." She sobbed and said something that couldn't be heard. "And now my boyfriend don't want me."

Jeff pushed on the reel to make it go faster, so her voice was like a chipmunk. "I don't know how I'll gonna live if I don't get something I can.."

she quipped. Jeff and Todd roared. "Wait" Todd said, changing the speed. "Now move the reel back and forth with your hand."

"If someone just told me they loved me. Do you love me, Todd?" coming out sounding like Jerry Lewis as they altered the tape speed across the play heads. Jeff and Todd cried with laughter. "Do you love me Todd?" Jeff asked in a rubbery comic voice.

"Do you love me, Jeff," Todd retorted between his convulsive tears of laughter. "Lets put some echo on it."

Todd turned a dial and made the voice sound like it was coming out of a tunnel. They slowly stopped laughing. "Wow," Todd said. "That sounds pretty eerie." They fell silent as the voice turned to cries of indecipherable syllables. They turned the volume to the highest setting and stared in front of them, listening. "Its like its not even a human," Jeff thought out loud. "Its like... a rabbit... when you butcher it.. and fuck up the job..."

They both thought "drink" at the same time and bumped into each other rising together to get to the refrigerator.

There was a brief moment when Todd thought he saw a face at the open window, but it was followed so quickly by a pounding at the front door that he didn't have a chance to speak. "What the fuck..." Jeff reached over and turned the tape machine off. They both stood in front of the refrigerator with the door still open, holding bottles of beer and suppressing the desire to pop them open. The pounding came once again, now with a voice the didn't recognize.

“Sally! Sally, you in there! I thought you was dead!” There was pounding again. Todd reached under some papers on the table and pulled out his tape eraser, passing it fast once and twice over the reel on the tape machine and ripping off the label that said “dead one,” crumpling it up and putting it in his pocket. “Who are you?” he yelled at the door trying to sound different than he was.

“I heard Sally in there! I heard her, I know her voice! Let me in or I’m gonna call police! I’ll call police!” He pounded again.

Something in Jeff gave way and he shook his head. “Adventure, right? Fuck it. Let’s let him in. Go on. Its your apartment. You go let him in.”

Todd sprung to the door and swung it open. “Keep it dow...” he started when he saw the man standing there was holding a switchblade out in front of him. “Well.. shit you’re coming in here anyway, right? Come in. Just keep it down.” Todd stepped way back and gave the man plenty of space. The intruder seemed slightly calmed by the lack of resistance, though he kept his knife out in front of him and particularly, trained on Todd.

“I heard Sally in here. She was dead.” His face was sweating and red. He looked like he’d been drinking a lot. He was short, with a handlebar mustache, with deeply sunken eyes swimming in watery, wrinkled sockets. He looked like he had been crying too. “Where is she?”

“We don’t know anyone by that name,” Todd lied. Its just us two here. Go on, look around.” He stepped back as the man timidly circled him, while watching Jeff too, and did a quick backward walking search of the whole small apartment. At this point, Jeff and Todd could have run for the door

and made it out, but it didn't occur to either of them. They wanted, more than safety, to know what was going to happen next.

Satisfied but confused that they were there alone, his eyes settled on the tape machine. "What's on that?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Todd said, "nothing at all. Here, listen," he said turning the dial to "play" and hoping that the erasure had deleted the voice that it had held. The volume was up all the way, but all that came out of the speaker was a loud, snake-like hiss. The man moved forward to the table and dropped his knife welding arm to his side.

"Jesus," he said. "I'm drunk. I...I wanted to kill someone... I could have killed you. I thought you was holding Sally in here. Jesus. I'll give up. You call the police on me right now. I should be put away..." at this he set himself at the table and tears rolled down his cheeks. He was beyond swallowing them or choking them off. They just ran straight down his cheeks like they were lead. He was crying on the table and it ran onto the floor. "You turn me in. I must be crazy."

Todd and Jeff moved in, Jeff first, then Todd, relatively assured of their own safety, but not quite sure how it was going to play out yet. Jeff made the next step too, putting his hand on the man's shoulder. "You've obviously suffered a great loss. I wouldn't think of making a fellow creature..." he looked for more perfect words "... suffer more." He rubbed the man's shoulder now as he gained a confidence in his own strength in the situation. "Yes, I can see you're in a lot of pain..." Jeff looked at Todd from behind the man and nodded toward the refrigerator, shaking his head "no" when Todd drew out a beer and "yes" when he withdrew a fresh fifth of vodka. "You need some

friends,” Jeff said to the man, “who have good ears and an understanding nature.” Todd poured a glassful of the vodka and put it down in front of the man. “No one’s going to call the police here. You’re just going to calm yourself and talk to us.”

The man took a long draw on his drink like he’d already been doing it all day. Todd splashed it full to the rim before the man could finish it. “My name is Jim, Jim Fidorovich.”

“First name’s enough,” Jeff said. “I’m Jeff, and that’s Todd.” They all made eye contact and Todd bobbed his head hello.

Jim gulped another mouthful of vodka. “My girl friend kilt herself is the thing. She jumped in the river. She lived with me, and I hit her but she still wouldn’t go, so I locked her out, the dumb bitch, so she jumps in the river. But all I wanted was to teach her something, some self respect, so I wouldn’t hit her. Do you understand that? I thought maybe she was fucking around because she clamed up so much, but she was probably too dumb to fuck around.” He swallowed another mouthful. “I was walking by for something or some reason up the street and I hear her voice just as plain as she was still alive coming from in here. But I’m fucked. I must have the DTs.” He drained the rest of his glass.

“Look, everyone loses people,” Jeff improvised. “You’ve got to be strong, it wasn’t your fault. Things like that just happen. For instance, just last year, Todd heres’ mother, father, sister and girlfriend were all killed in a car crash.” Todd looked mournfully to the floor, then filled Jim’s glass again on cue from Jeff.

“Yeah, but, Sally, that was my fault you see, she done it because I pushed her to it.”

“To tell you the truth...” Jeff paused, thinking how to top it. “...Todd here had this old car his father liked to use, and he got pissed off, so he fucked up the brakes himself so his father wouldn’t use it. But his dad took it out anyway, and killed the whole family but for Todd. It was all Todd’s fault!”

At that, Jim threw his arms out in the air like “come to me” to Todd. “By god, that is worse. You know what its like too. I’m so sorry for you.” Todd moved over and let the man drunkenly hug him. Todd began rocking back and forth, and this made Jim completely passive. Jeff quietly leaned over and picked up the switchblade from the floor, and put it into his own pocket.

“Okay, lets all go out for a walk. I think we need some air.” Jeff broke the spell that had come over Jim, but Jim’s anger had passed. He was ready to tag along. He a little ashamedly let go of his hold on Todd. Jeff took the rest of the bottle of vodka and the three of them left the apartment, walked across the porch and onto the sidewalk. It was late. No one moved on the street, everything was closed. “Railroad tracks,” Jeff said to Todd over the head of Jim who followed between them. Jeff handed Jim the bottle. “Here feller, take another good, long swig.” Jim obeyed like a new pet. “Were going to cut through here a take a nice walked down by the tracks.

A dog barked nearby as the three pushed alders and brush aside to descend the hill the back way, along an old path that was overgrown and little used. No one saw as they reached the tracks and walked beyond the places lit by street and building night lights. “Look, there are some fiddleheads,” Jeff pointed to a spot out of sight.”

“What you call them?” Jim asked.

“You know, fiddle heads. You can eat them. Look.” Jeff pointed again. As Jim lean forward, Jeff picked up a rock from beside the track and hit Jim with it as hard as he could. Jim fell straight away, holding his head and moaning. “Well?” Jeff yelled. Todd picked up a two by four from the ground and hit Jim on his head. Jim rolled onto his back and was still. Todd and Jeff stood holding their weapons for a moment, gasping with the exertion and rush of adrenaline before the upturned face beckoned them to break it, like an egg that has survived the dropping of the carton. They commenced to hit and pound the face until the head was caved in all the way to the back. They rested again. Todd wanted to hear what a snapping arm would sound like, so he hit One of Jim’s arms until there was a “crack,” and then, wanting more, he broke the other arm, and then a leg.

When they were finished, they sat in the dirt and shared a Marlboro Jeff found loose in his pocket. They looked nervously at each other. “Can you live with this?” Todd asked.

“Sure,” Jeff said certainly. “Can you?”

“Ahuh.”

“Do you think anyone knows?”

“No one saw,” he said assuringly.

Neither of them knew what to do with the body, so they left it where it died. In a day it was found, and in a few more days identified. But there were no follow up stories on the television news or in the newspapers. Todd and Jeff stopped drinking for a few weeks, thinking that somehow one of them might slip up and say something too loud. But the topic never arose again, and eventually they both returned to their previous lifestyles. Todd thought about making situations where he might tape record people again, and Jeff dreamed

of mystical origins of the painted image, and of taking the painted canvas to some unforeseen artistic conclusion of art. And within a year, they were both looking forward to graduating college.

Close Encounter

The story in the newspaper was a big one. It was a close encounter. Jamie Larson from Old Town, employed as an insurance salesman at Carl Lobson and Sons was driving home after working late when he was overcome with fatigue. He pulled off onto a narrow dirt drive that led to a field, expecting to close his eyes for a few minutes. And there he saw it. Three bright lights descended straight down from the sky. As they drew closer, he could see they outlined a disk shaped object, which continued to descend, until it landed in the field directly in front of him. Jamie, who the photograph in the newspaper showed looked like Robert Vaughn, took his 22 pistol replica of a Luger from the glove compartment and got out of his car. He approached the silent but now glowing disk and, he said, yelled out, "Who are you?" and when there was no response, "what do you want?" at which time he raised his gun and emptied the clip at it. After the shots had echoed through the surrounding trees, the disk soundlessly rose straight up and disappeared into the sky in a matter of seconds. He reported the incident to both the police and the newspaper. When he went out to the sight with a reporter and photographer, they found a burned ring in the grass where the object had touched down. They took a picture of Jamie, looking like Robert Vaughn, in front of the burned ring with his arm extended downward, holding his gun. It was a dramatic story. It was the talk of the community.

Elsie and William Kruger sat with their children Scott and Deb at the kitchen table, eating dinner on a Saturday. Spanish rice was one of Scott's favorite meals, though he could do without the peas his mom always served it with. The hamburger in it tasted a little different than the last time, but this was the meat from the moose that Ruel found shot out behind his house last week, so, moose meat will always taste different. Scott thought, better.

“Gotta butcher some rabbits for Ruel this afternoon. He gave us a lot of what we’re eating.” Funny how the Lord gives when you don’t expect.” William raised his chin in a proud gesture, with him so close to the giver, being the minister.

“I think Ruel give that moose a bullet!” Scott laughed his child’s laugh, but was immediately sorry for it.

“You hush!” William reached over and open handed Scott on the side of the head, who swallowed before the hand hit him. He knew better than to spray. That’d mean another swat. “You show respect for elders. Ruel said he found it out back, breathing its last breath. He called the sheriff and ‘ sheriff said, ‘go ‘head, cut it up, no sense to waste. That’s good enough for me. Straight with God, straight with the law. You feel blessed, boy. God provides.” He shoveled a forkful of the Spanish rice.

“See about that fella Jamie ‘n yesterday’s paper?” Elsie changed the subject.

“Lotta hooey I think.” Another shovel full.

“I think it could be a sign,” Elsie said defensively.

“A sign he’s drunk. Or on drugs.”

Elsie was calm but unconvinced. “He looks like a nice young man. Why’d he lie?”

“Get his picture in the paper, sell more ‘surance!” William choked once and coughed out a piece of burger.

“What I meant by a sign is,” Elsie continued unaffected, “that in the end time, the Bible says that there will be signs. I think that such things might be end time warnings, and maybe, angels.”

“I wanta see one too!” Scott said excitedly. Deb put a forkful of peas in her mouth and shot an exasperated look at Scott.

“If there are signs, they wont come to a ‘surance salesman. It’ll be a sign

to the God fearing. 'Hold on,' the sign will say. 'The end is near.' "

"Well honey," Elsie said, "who knows what's in the heart of a man. Maybe Jamie will be one of the saved." Suddenly she felt exposed. The photo did make him look like an attractive man. Why couldn't a handsome man be saved? Why just men with hard hands, and bent over backs? Elsie felt something disagreeable in her thoughts, and silently asked God for forgiveness right there at the table.

"There's nothing up there to see," William stated. "Just the Heaven and the Hell when we die. And if God gives a sign, there won't be any speculating for the saved. It will be clear." He finished eating, dropped his napkin on his plate and ran a hand straight back through his thinning hair. "I'm done. Thank you for cooking, Mrs. I gotta go out and butcher." And he left the table.

After he'd left the room, Elsie leaned over to Scott, speaking softly just in case. "Be respectful to your father. I don't like you to get hit, but you deserve it!" She leaned back and pushed some peas into her Spanish rice.

From outside came sounds of squealing and cracking skulls on the woodblock. Inside, Elsie leaned into the table again, in case anyone else could hear. "In Bible times, Ezekiel saw a wheel, and that was a sign of prophecy. I think the same thing seen today would be the beginning of the end. That's what UFOs mean. They're signs that Christ will be coming again. They say, 'get your house in order. Repent sinner, before its too late.'" She leaned back having spoken her piece.

Scott leaned forward, speaking cautiously like her. Outside another skull crunched under the back of the ax head. "I think UFOs is from space. I read it in Fate magazine from the bus stop. A lot of people been seeing em. Some people get taken away! There's lots of stuff like that in Fate magazine. They're aliens in space. If we're lucky, they'll choose us to take up!"

“Don’t talk foolish!” Elsie scolded quietly. “No aliens ever been here. That’s made up. But there’s been Jesus, and prophecies, signs and angels. What do you think, Deb?”

“I think Jesus should come back,” without hesitation.

Elsie nodded approvingly. “We’d all like our Savior to return.”

William came in, changed his spattered shirt and went into his study, closing the door behind him. In a moment his voice resounded in oratory, practicing the sermon he was preparing for Sunday.

Upstairs after dinner was eaten and dishes cleaned up, Scott showed Deb his Fate magazine. “Here’s this story on levitating. See the picture? It shows how to lay down and then people stand around and raise you up in the air while you concentrate. You try to think how light you are, and they think that too.”

Scott laid down on his bed and concentrated on being light. Deb sat on the floor next to the bed and also thought, “light, light, light.” After the fifteen minutes concentration period stipulated, she put her hands under Scott’s side and tried to lift up. Scott was rigid and tried to rise straight up in the air. Instead, he rolled on his side and went over the edge of the bed, on the other side. He jumped up quickly. “Did I feel lighter? I thought I floated.”

“You felt lighter,” Deb said, convinced. “You raised up a little bit.”

Sunday morning, Scott took a bath and put his suit on. William was touching up his sermon, pacing back and forth in his study with the door closed. Scott ate some cereal with a paper napkin stuffed in the neck of his shirt and walked to church for Sunday school.

Scott wished he was in a younger class or a more advanced. He didn’t like Mr. Stanley. He liked his daughter Jill, who was in the class, though. Mr. Stanley always

acted like she wasn't there. Last week Jill came in with her left arm in a cast. She said she'd put it in the washing machine. Scott could picture her opening the machine, reaching in and snapping her arm around the agitator. But then he remembered how Mr. Stanley had once twisted his arm behind his back way too hard, just for making faces. Then he could see Mr. Stanley twisting Jill's arm in his head and not the washing machine. He rubbed his elbow remembering. He thought about the story in Fate magazine. Some of the people who had been abducted by UFOs had returned with old injuries healed. Scars would be gone. One man came back and found out he'd grown an appendix. He'd had it removed years before, but his appendix came back, and the scar was gone!

Mr. Stanley came into the room and sat down at the table. Scott sat up straight.

After church, Scott laid on the floor in his room and pulled the books out from underneath his bed. He made some money from lawn mowing. When William went calling at the VA hospital, Scott would go into the Greyhound bus stop up the street and buy some books and magazines. He looked at his collection. "UFOs, Serious Business," "Lo!," "The Abominable Snowman", and a stack of Fate magazines. He opened one. There was an article about a man who'd been abducted by a flying saucer. He could remember being experimented on with strange instruments. He was kept for three days, then dropped off on a roadside near where he lived, late at night. Within a week, he had grown a complete second set of eyebrows on his forehead. He also had an increased brain power. He took an IQ test after he was released and it had risen close to fifty points, to 165!

Scott looked through some of the magazines for photographs. There weren't

many good pictures of saucers, but a lot of other evidence, and pictures of people pointing. There were burned rings on the ground, and photos of cuts on arms where some people had been probed and tested. A smell distracted Scott. He went to his door and sniffed the air. Deb again. She was going to get in trouble. She was smoking next to the window in her room. He wished she'd stop. William was going to find out.

"Dinner!" William yelled up the stairs. Rabbit with shake-and-bake, corn and mashed potatoes. "Thank-you Lord for what we are about to receive, and bless and help the less fortunate than ourselves help themselves, in Jesus name, Amen." They cut into the thick white meat of the rabbit legs, forked the potatoes and corn. "Hard work bringing this to our table. But God made it all."

At night, Elsie stepped outside the house and went down back to the Penobscot River. There was a distant moving light. She watched it patiently. It slowly got larger and closer. Eventually a glowing, cigar-shaped object hovered above the water less than a hundred feet from her. "Are you Gabriel?" she asked the air.

In the next day's paper, there were two stories of local UFO spottings, accompanied by photographs of moving lights. Scott sat at the kitchen table and snipped out the articles. "I saw it last night," Elsie said from the sink, putting on rubber gloves to rinse out their bowls. She looked out the window to see William was still outside weeding. "It was just like they said. It was an oblong, glowing object." Deb was just coming into the kitchen for breakfast.

"Mum saw a flying saucer," Scott told her.

"It was not a flying saucer," Elsie said. It was a sign from God. It was an oblong glowing object."

“Mum saw a UFO from outer space,” Scott said in a lowered voice.

“Well, do you children think you’re ready?”

“Just gotta brush my teeth,” Scott said, finishing his dissection of the newspaper.

“Not for school,” Elsie turned, eyeing them both in a scold, “for the end of time?”

Scott saw Jill Stanley at recess. She was sitting by herself on a bench, not playing, arm in a cast. He sat down next to her and unfolded the newspaper articles on the UFO sightings he’d stuffed in his pocket. “Have you heard about flying saucers?”

Jill looked at him shyly, then looked around the school yard too see who was watching, or who might tease her. “Naw. What’s a flying saucer?”

“Its a UFO A Unidentified Flying Object,” he pronounced slowly. “All they know,” thinking how to say it, “is they’re from outer space, or maybe another dimension,” not really knowing what that could mean. “I think they’re from outer space. They’re aliens in ‘em. Sometimes they come down and take people away.”

“Do they bring them back?”

“Sometimes. Then sometimes,” thinking what he’d read in his magazines, “they take a whole fleet of planes and you never hear about them again.”

“Its like going to heaven, huh?”

“Naw, they go to space. They experiment on ‘em, to learn. If they’re sick or busted up, they fix ‘em. I think they experiment on ‘em so they can fix people better. Like that arm of yours? They could make that like new in five minutes.”

Jill smiled, her first in a long time. “I want to believe in UFOs too!”

It was such a warm day, Scott knew the snapping turtles would be on rocks in the

water behind the house. After school, he walked home along the river, sneaking up behind turtles and surprising them, and throwing rocks at the sucker fish he could see feeding on the bottom.

As soon as he got home, he could smell the smoke. Deb was really in trouble this time! He went to the bathroom and got the Glade spray freshener, running around the room, scenting the air with the potpourri.

Scott felt panic. The car was gone. He went to the kitchen window. There was William, outside weeding in the garden. That meant Elsie had the car for grocery shopping. Deb must have smoked up a storm. "Deb! Deb, you're in trouble! I can smell it all over!" There was the sound of the door opening and Deb was at the top of the stairs.

"I don't care! I'm sick of being scared all the time! You think God wants that? If Dad goes to heaven in the end time, I rather go ta hell! I don't want no heaven, just hell!"

The front door swung open hard and banged against the wall. William stood breathing heavy from the weeding but sniffed the air between long puffs of wind. Scott ran past him into the living room. "What's that smell?" William bellowed. Scott could see him crushing rabbit's heads with the ax in his mind. He showed this kind of anger when a rabbit struggled. He hoped Deb wouldn't. She would just make it worse for herself. He tried to disappear on the couch. "You! Come down here, young lady!" She was frozen at the top. "You been smoking in this house? You come down here when I tell you to!" She fearfully descended the stairs. "What other sins you been committing?" William grabbed her by her arm and yanked her down the last three steps, levitating her through the living room into his study and slamming the door closed behind him. "You bring tobacco into this house? A God fearing house?"

The smack of his hand hard against skin. A scream like rabbits make. Scott pressed his hands over his ears. Still he could hear her body slamming against a shelf of books. "You fornicate too?" Another slap, this time dull, like maybe he was closing his hand. Rabbit scream. Vomit. "You think you're scared now? You think you be scared in hell?" Dull hitting sounds, body against wall, more vomiting, rabbit sounds. Long silence followed by a resounding smack. More puking, making him madder. An hour.

Scott curled up invisible the whole time. Elsie came home and retired to the upstairs bedroom. Eventually the study door opened. William came out and got some paper towels to mop up puke. Deb slunk out, finished with, and crept up the stairs, going into her room and closing the door as quietly as she could.

William had his supper in his study. Deb stayed in her room. Elsie and Scott ate together in the kitchen, though uncomfortable with each other.

After dark, Scott went outside and laid on his back in the front yard. Elsie followed him out and laid down next to him.

"She shouldn't have sinned. If she just behaved, it would have been all right. But she'll learn a lesson from it, that's for sure." Elsie was quiet. There was a single sniff. "You learn something from this too. Don't go against your father." There was another pause. "This'll be over soon enough anyway," she said like she was concluding. "Have you seen any moving lights out there?"

"No," Scott said, staring at the void above. "There ain't no UFOs."

No Greater Love

John sat at the Ramada Inn bar with another man who he knew he was going to rip off. "I am going to rip this guy's money," John thought, "just like I'm going to rip the guy who's coke I'm moving."

"The quality of your stuff is very good."

"It's some of the best I've seen, myself," John testified.

Ann sat at a table with a work friend. They were still wearing their uniforms; a pink dress ending just above the knees with a white apron sewn onto the front at the waist. The only difference between their appearance in the lounge was the color of their hair and the names on their tags that they'd left on out of habit.

"Can you believe the music Debbie wants to play all day?" Ann's real anger had been broken by two drinks.

"If we could wear earplugs, I would."

"We could just point to the menu." Ann laughed and did an imitation of Vana White.

"Or we could sign." Julie mimed a deaf and dumb Vana.

"It reminds me of my age every day." Ann rubbed her face. "I don't think I look that old...but when I hear this music they listen to now..."

"I'd almost rather this..." Julie gestured toward a musician playing a nylon stringed guitar up on the small lounge stage. "It's probably the easiest to take over a long stretch."

"Did I ever tell you..." Ann was hesitant about being too revealing, but then the drinks- "... that I studied guitar once? Classical guitar, too." She put her hands out proudly then formed them into postures as if playing along with the lounge guitarist. "I could have probably played this, if I were in

practice.” She made eye contact with the guitarist, who seemed annoyed at her gestures. He diverted his eyes to the ceiling in an exaggerated way and continued to play, slightly more forcefully.

“Do you see how that fella up there has his left hand moved around almost to the front of the guitar neck?” Ann pointed and Julie turned around in her chair to look.

The guitarist tried not to see them. He began singing words he had written to the Bach invention he was playing.

“How can you sleep
while the devil is
laughing...”

Ann gestured with her hands again. “That’s a trained position, not a self taught. He gets better reach.”

“Ha ha ha ha
ha ha ha ha
ha ha ha ha
ha.”

“He’s classically trained for sure. I could have played if I’d stuck with it.” She half closed her eyes as she plucked along to the increasingly scratchy and clawed sounding playing.

When he finished his song, the musician turned to Ann and Julie. “You know its very distracting to have someone using their hands the way you were when I’m playing. Its rude and stupid. This isn’t folk music you know. This is difficult work.”

It was impossible not to overhear the reprimand. Everyone in the bar turned to look for a moment. Ann and Julie became sheepish as they sipped their drinks, slumping forward in the chairs to try to disappear.

“Can I make a special request?” John asked the musician, walking

to the edge of the stage. Leaning over, he whispered, "You want me to break your fingers, you little dick? Mind yourself," then patted him on the back, squeezing his shoulder enough to hurt.

The man John had been talking to at the bar sat for a moment until John seated himself with Julie and Ann, then left.

"Don't let that squirt bother you," John blustered, turning to see the musician was packing up his guitar, his eyes darting around him like a herbivore expecting a carnivorous predator. Their eyes met for a second as the musician clamped his instrument case shut and fled the stage. "Must be a first timer," John said loudly. "Can I buy you ladies your next round?"

Ann and Julie smiled, somewhat restored. "Okay," Julie answered for them both.

"That guy was good," Ann said, looking down. "He was right, I shouldn't have been playing in the air the way I was. It disturbed his concentration."

John scoffed. "First thing, if he's so good why's he playing at the Ramada Inn on a Thursday night? Secondly," pounding the table with his index finger, "he looks like outpatient."

Ann laughed, though John was serious. Then he laughed. "Here's to crazy everywhere," she toasted as the waiter brought three fresh drinks.

They washed the angry sounds of the classical music out of their minds with songs on the jukebox, some Jerry Lee and funky old Ko Ko Taylor. John sang along with the songs he knew and talked over the ones he didn't. So they sang and exchanged confident and shy glances until last call and the stools went up on the tables.

To John, her person was clear. Fallen angel, Madonna whore, wanting

to do right, ready to please, loosens up with a few drinks, judges herself before others, a little needy. And a worker. Something he could go for, a real old lady. He'd call on her sometime.

Following footsteps are different than independent walking. They tend toward stealth but don't expect to be unnoticed, so they try to make up for it with an unnatural, even distance, they are frequently in step with the prey, though sometimes intentionally uneven, to appear independent. The moment of thought, hesitation and change can be detected. It can add up to following steps in the mind of the prey if that person is easily victimized, female, aware of the threats.

Ann knew something was off when she began home, a shift and a half tired, too dark, too late and still. Wouldn't spend for a taxi, why work extra hours to spend money at the end of it? She was overtaxed and didn't want to heed her natural senses. She walked, ignoring the sounds that came from behind.

The musician nailed her to the ground with his little dick. She knew it was him, even in the dark, even at three in the morning. She was fading in and out, but she could feel his hands, powerful hands, hands like a musician she wanted to be. They held her by the arms as his dick did its work, his oily black curls hanging in her face, a hiss that must accompany a sneer, a punch in her stomach as he finished up and a "cunt" as he scurried away into the dark morning.

She bled some when she got home after the rape. She worked the next day despite the discomfort and her fear, telling no one and complaining of cramps, so to be let to use her allotted breaks and a few minutes extra off her feet. She usually worked a six day week, followed by a seven. Her day off per two weeks was near, and when it came, she stayed in bed all day despite the need to do laundry.

Ann quickly and abruptly pulled away from Julia, yet it was so busy at work that the change was hardly noticed. She made a pattern of her life now, thoughtlessly rising, cleaning herself, going to work, going home, sitting quiet for awhile until she could sleep. The pattern stayed in place for weeks, until John called on her.

John brought Ann flowers. It was a mixed bouquet, he'd let the florist pick them out, a few roses, some variously colored carnations, ferns, daisies, and one big sunflower as a center piece. John thought the combination of colors might have been better, but his confidence lapsed in this area and he left it out of his hands.

The door buzzer was loose in its socket. John held it with one hand and pushed straight down with a finger. He heard a shrill beep from inside.

It was a Sunday morning. As often as not Ann would already be at work by now, but it happened that the doorbell had rung on one of her days off. She'd been sitting quietly but now she tried to sit even more so. She looked at her cup of coffee in front of her, afraid to pick it up lest it let out some kind of sound that would give her presence away. As quiet as she could be, the buzzer still rang; long intervals in between, patient but insistent. Ann got up and went to the door.

"Who's there?" She couldn't recognize the face distorted by the peep hole lens.

"It's me, John. From awhile ago. Come a calling. Can I see you?"

She could tell who he was now through the peep hole. She could see his flowers. "I don't know if I can." She was chewing her lower lip. "It might not be a good time." She wanted him to go away, but he'd been so nice before,

she thought. And she was feeling lonely. "Can we talk through the door?"

"That seems kind of odd," John answered, "are you undressed?"

"No, but I'm not feeling well." She thought for something better. "I've got strep throat. You'll get it."

"Really? Your voice sounds fine."

"Its the medication, it helps."

"Oh. So you can talk."

"Yes, if you'd like to... talk through the door." She was starting to feel silly, but she couldn't back out of her story now. "I had a good time. The other night. Thanks for the drinks."

"Well, no problem. That was nothing. I'd like to do it again sometime. Actually, I was thinking we could go for a drive sometime, sight see the coast a little, picnic."

"That sounds nice. But..." sounding deflated. "I have to work most of the time. My next day would be in two weeks."

"That doesn't seem fair," John said taken aback, "to you, I mean. You work every day?"

"Just about."

"Well, there might be some way, I think, for you to take a little time."

"My budget is pretty tight. I live alone..." "Shit" she said to herself. Revealed way too much. To a stranger! Everything that happens to me is my own fault!

"My budget might be a little different from yours. Look, you only live once, right?"

She began to speak but her words were choked back. John could hear it.

"I liked you the other night but something happened since. I don't think I can

be with anyone for awhile.”

“You met someone?”

“No, not like that. But something happened.” She suddenly felt herself forced to trust him. What she wanted to say was nothing. She wanted to cry. She said, “Listen,…” as if she was going to say something more, and then she cried through the door.

Her need for someone overcame her fear, because she opened the door and stepped back, letting John in to do as he would.

He didn’t move immediately to touch her or comfort her. He looked around the small, multipurpose room until his eyes rested on a low table.

He put the flowers on it. “Do you have a vase?”

Still choking on her sobs, she pointed to a paneled cabinet across a threshold in a walk-in kitchen. John stepped in and opened the cabinet. There were some drinking cups with printing on them. John could make out one Heineken glass. In behind was a plain block shaped vase. He carefully took it down, moving steadily but slowly near Ann. He filled it with water, brought the flowers from the table and cut their ends with the kitchen knife left on the counter, and put them in the vase, sprinkling the packet of plant food the florist had put between the stems into the water as an afterthought. His methodical movements calmed Ann, despite the random order of his flower preparations. With some effort, she managed the words, “You’re supposed to dissolve the plant food in the water, before you put the flowers in.”

John made a silent broad gesture of invitation with his hand. Ann went into the kitchen passed John and pulled the flowers from the vase. “You’ve done this all backwards.”

She stirred the water with a long spoon from a drawer in the counter. "See, dissolve the plant food. Did you pay attention to how much water the plant food packet said?" He didn't respond. "And when you cut stems, do it under cool running water in the sink." She repeated what he'd done, then put the plants in the vase on the low table. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to lecture. Women know this stuff because they have to." Then there was a retreat into silence.

John went into the kitchen, took a glass from the cabinet and poured himself water from the sink. He sat in one of the two chairs before the low table and sipped his water. Ann sat in the other chair in a response that was automatic.

After several minutes of silence, John spoke. "I know we have something special between us. I know that you know you can talk to me. I might be able to help you if you're in trouble with something. Tell me what's happen to you."

"I work late. Sometimes more than one shift. I walk home. That musician from the bar raped me. He followed me from somewhere and raped me and hit me and left me on the ground. It was him. He did it to me. I didn't tell anyone. That's it. I don't feel right."

It came out just like that, in one piece, the way a surgeon would be happy to get a tumor. Ann breathed heavily.

John didn't say anything about staying or leaving. He was there until or if she asked for anything, including leaving which she didn't. They sat for a long time and later put on the black and white TV, and John fixed the bent antenna a little better.

John was on his own time. He didn't have a job to speak of. He made his own money his own way. He tracked the musician. It wasn't hard. A couple of friends working at local bars and restaurants helped him narrow it down. There were

a limited number of places a guy like that could play. It turned out he had two regular gigs each week. John followed him on foot after these gigs. He walked home on a path that would intersect Ann's. So the angry little man was still out there, passing by Ann on these nights, perhaps waiting to do it again when he felt particularly set upon.

At first John thought to kill him outright. But then, the thought of living maimed came to him, for a musician maybe a worse fate.

He waited in his car, parked on the curb where he had watched the musician pass by on several nights between two thirty and three in the morning. The time came and went. Maybe he didn't perform that night, or was ill, or maybe he'd heard that someone had asked about him. Just as John was ready to give up for the night and pull away, he saw him, slightly hunchbacked, carrying his guitar case. John picked the sandwich bag up from the seat next to him and took out the ether soaked rag. He turned the ceiling light to off position and opened the already ajar car door, slipping out silently with his bag of tools.

The musician started when the tool bag was dropped on the sidewalk, but John's movements were too quick to allow for more. The musician felt a strong arm around his chest and cloth forced over his face before he blacked out.

Up in the bushes beside the sidewalk, John acted as efficiently as any professional. He flopped the unconscious man flat on his back and spread out his hands on both sides of him. He cut off two fingers and the thumb on the left hand with heavy wire cutters. Then he took a mallet from his tool bag and pounded the knuckles until they were mush. He cut off the thumb of the other hand and smashed the bones into pulp. Then, with equal precision, he crushed the kneecaps with a single blow each.

Simultaneously, the man moaned and John saw someone over the tops of the bushes turning on his heels and going away along the sidewalk, carrying a guitar case. He could tell by the man's body shape that this was in fact the musician he had intended to intercept. He felt a sudden anger at this idiot impostor who had wasted his time in behind the bushes. But his mistake let no one off the hook. John was over the bushes in no time, and in a few fast steps was on the fleeing musician. A yell was suppressed by a stony fist and the man fell to the ground. John dragged him up the street to where he'd captured the first musician, then threw him up over the stone wall into the bushes, landing him close to the other unconscious man. Exhausted now but still high on adrenaline, John stuffed the ether soaked rag into his first victim's mouth. Then he set upon the lounge performer with a renewed and fevered inspiration, cutting, stabbing, and hammering the limbs until he had carved it into a thing incapable of holding, or even feeling, another thing.

John left the two men alive, together, picturing them waking to find the state that they were in, and wondering which of the stumps he'd left on the ground belonged to who.

Ambulances flew through the dark before dawn. John was already across town. He knew the apartment, he knew schedules, strengths and weaknesses, because he had done business, worked with and been trusted by the figures in this underworld. But this trusted person was only one personae of a man who lived in several different lives. Where some were criminals twenty-four hours a day, John was on a time share system with his many parts. Right now, he was not the man who they trusted.

He announced himself through the apartment intercom. He was recognized

and buzzed in immediately. No suspicion. He was there to make a pick up for a sale he'd set up a week before. It was for a distributor from out of town. John went to the closet and removed the false back to reveal the stash. "Stupid," John thought, coke and money together like that. He'd never said anything before. This was why. He knew it'd be his. He unzipped his bag. He looked over his shoulder into the room. Three men sat on the chairs and sofa, drinking Pabst from cans and watching "The Price is Right." There was a Browning 9mm on the checker topped table, a bag of Fritos and loose stems of weed that'd fallen from the ends of a sloppy rolling job. John shook his head to himself. This would be the last thing they knew. He drew a 45 out of his gym bag and shot all three of them, one, two, three, left to right, through their faces, blowing the backs of their heads out in different angled explosions.

He loaded his satchel with their cocaine and cash. He didn't bother with their stash of guns. He had his own.

John counted the cash in his car; just under fifty thousand. Loose change for some, a fortune for others. He parsed out the cocaine for the gentleman from out of town. John was feeling Christian. He had enough cash. He had enough coke to sell or use as currency for a long time. He'd changed his plan. He'd play this deal straight. He'd even sweeten it. He might bump into this guy again some day, since he was going to let him live.

The deal went down in a room of the Ramada Inn. He turned over the coke, they tested it, then did a few lines on him. He got the cash and packed it in the spare tire stash in his trunk.

"Hi. Its nice to see you. But I'm kind of working right now." Ann's eyes moved around her, checking if she was being watched.

“You don’t care,” he told her.

“What?” I have to work!” She realized her voice was raised. “Please,” she whispered, seeing her supervisor had turned around across the room and was looking at her. John shot a look at the other woman; passed middle age sour faced, abusive. “Fuck her, Ann. Come with me. Get out of here before you end up like her. We’re set, believe me. I’ll take care of you.”

Ann was frozen between the two commanders. “I’ll decide for you,” John said, grabbing Ann by the wrist and pulling her out through the front door of the coffee shop. “You get in the car!” Ann did as she was told.

They’d drive for awhile. They’d see the countryside maybe for a few weeks or a few months. Then they’d visit some family. They’d rent a house out on an island somewhere. John could teach Ann how to use a gun. He’d take Ann’s name. They’d lay low for a long time. They’d have each other. They’d be safe.

As God Bid

She was sitting two pews in front of me in church on Sunday, and I could hardly hear the preacher, I was so distracted. At first I thought, how could someone have God in them and be so attractive like to make you want them, but then I saw how she was paying attention to the sermon and I knew she was with God, and how the sin was in me, not her.

After the service I left slowly, letting a couple of people in front of me so she was just behind me. Our eyes met and I knew I wanted to talk to her. After we filed by the pastor and shook his hand, saying, “Good sermon,” and “Inspirin’,” we were both outside on the little patio in front of the steps, side by side, but like we was just watching folks go by.

“That was quite a good sermon, don’t you think?” I blurted out to break the ice.

“Yeah, it was good. What part did you like the best?”

“It was all just as good as the best parts,” trying to wiggle out of not paying attention.

“I liked the part,” starting fast like she’d already been thinking about it, “where the pastor talks about sharing, then gives the example of when he was little, sharing gum with a girl. It was funny when he said, ‘after I chewed it, a course!’ “

“Yeah, everybody laughed.” So that’s what was so funny. “By the way, my name’s Jake Brown.” I reached out and she reached out her hand too. I took it, but I squeezed it instead of shaking it.

“Mine’s Jean Campbell.”

“I haven’t seen you in church before today.”

"I just moved here. Otherwise you would have seen me," she let out a nervous laugh, "every Sunday."

"Yeah. I never miss church myself. It can be hard to keep in touch with the Lord, on your own."

"Some people thinks prayer is enough, but I'd miss the sermons and the responsive readings," nodding her head to emphasize.

"Yes. It helps you to see the things in your life for what they mean..."

"In God's plan."

"In God's plan," like me meeting her was, I thought, and God let me skip the pastor's sermon so I'd notice her, That's exactly the way God works, I thought to myself. "Would you like to walk with me around the cemetery out back?" I asked, pointing to the graveyard visible beyond the church carriage house.

"Sure. I don't see why not."

We started walking, me leading. "They got some old grave stones in here. Not the oldest in town. There's two other cemeteries, but there's some in here over a hundred years old."

"Wow."

"They're near the back." We walked behind along a recently mowed lane and straight to a line of trees that marked the end and oldest part. The stones there were covered with lichen, some were broken and some had been repaired with metal braces. "Over under this here tree's my favorite grave," I said, almost wanting to take her by the hand. Instead I just warned her, "watch your footing, there's some roots can trip you up." I stumbled a little walking over them, they were so hidden in the grass. "I bet that tree has grown roots right through the casket."

Beneath a thick oak was a small chipped and worn marker the size of a book. The inscription on it said, "Annie, 1879, died at four years."

"It seems so sad. This one, so small you hardly notice, youngest person, oldest grave."

"She's my own girl's age," sounding like the beginning of a thought, left incomplete.

That threw me off. "You got a little girl? I didn't know you was married."

"I'm not. And I wasn't." She looked embarrassed. "I had her out of wedlock. But that was before I came to the Lord. She's my cross now. My curse, and sometimes my blessing, Jamie."

"Well, I suppose whatever the circumstances, a child is born without sin. You have someone to see to her while you're at church?" I knew I sounded terse right now, but I didn't want her to think I approved of that kind of thing.

"Yes, my neighbor is a widow, she's disabled, but she watches Jamie well enough. She looks after her too while I'm at work. I don't know what I'd do without her."

"Where you work?" I played a guessing game in my mind. She didn't work with me, so she couldn't work at too many other places. I bet on Diamond.

"Diamond Match plant."

"That pay good?" I knew it didn't. It was a factory, and she was a woman.

"Not much good. But's what I could get. Before I moved here I was cutting fish. That was worse."

"Yeah." I thought over some of the dirty jobs I'd had. "I did that once. A lot a work for what it gets ya. And you sure take it home." I laughed at my joke. Fish stink is always funny if you're not stuck cutting fish no more.

"My boyfriend got put in prison for a holdup. I had to work. Then I moved here to be a step up when he got out. I want to leave that life behind me." She sighed. "Of course, I'm reminded every day when I look at my little girl. Where do you work?"

"I'm over at Crowe Rope. Run one of them big machines, twists nylon twine into thick rope."

"Is that a hard job?"

"Bad on your back, hands get nylon melted on them from making splices with a heat bar. And I get nightmares, 'bout bobbins of twine running out and I gotta replace them, but a whole lot of them at once. Like the guy at the circus who keeps pie plates spinning on the ends of sticks!" I caught myself. I was sounding sour. Women thinks that's the same as whining. "It's okay though. A lot of folks is out of work. The hardest part is being around Godless men."

Jean nodded, knowing how that was. "That's true. I think the Lord puts us among the Godless sos we learn how to testify, though. I been talking about Jesus to people at work. Mostly they look at me like I'm crazy, but I think, you never know who'll be touched by the word of God. And all the practice makes me learn how to witness better."

While she was talking, I was thinking about the filthy mouthed vermin I had to be around every day, how they joked about how big they was and how much they did it. I hadn't testified to no one there in the whole ten years I'd been there. I guessed me and Jean didn't see the same about that.

I watched Jean walk over to some overgrowth and pull some daisies, come back and lay them on the grave of Annie. She turned to me and smiled. "Every child's born innocent," she says, 'cause that's what I'd said before. She knew a man

likes being right first.

Some time went by quick. When we got back to the churchyard everyone had gone home, except the bell ringer, who stayed 'till last to pick up left behind bulletins, sweep up in the vestibule and vacuum that burgundy rug that run between the two sides of the congregation and looks like spilled grape juice. I hate that rug, and that seat cushion covering, someone said it was called crushed velvet, and its crushed all right, worn bare and looks like the seat of my work pants. This isn't a wealthy town I know. But I pitch in my dollar at the collection plate though, and sometimes I'd like to know where it goes.

I had a nice time talking to Jean and I don't let on I ended our walk thinking bad things about the church, and even how I think the pastor maybe gets too much money and the church goes to seed for it. But I know that started when I got walking with her then thinking about the bad fellas at my job, some who make more money than me and is the most profane ungodly fatherless things that ever walked the earth. We had a good walk and a good talk, and I asked her, "can I see you sometime outside of church?" There was a Grange chowder feast coming up and the money you spend went to a good cause, like a burn unit at the VA hospital or something. I suggested that and that was a good idea.

I kicked myself after. The chowder feast was a week and a half away. I'm not good thinking about dates and how close and far away and so forth. I wanted to see Jean before that, was the thing. I liked her. Not without reservations, with the kid and all. I hadn't seen it yet, so I don't know how good it was trained, and how it was conceived was bothersome to me. But Jean was so pretty, and had such a nice way about her, I maybe was tricked. They say women with kids and no husband is always looking for a situation. I like to think the best of people. And

how good a man would I be if I thought that people couldn't mend their ways and turn to Christ for real, even when they were women, and the sin was fornicating? When I was young and papa was alive things would be more clear. Papa said once when I was a teenager that if I ever brought a pregnant girl home, he'd give me a hundred dollar and bounce me out. First thing is, I don't know where he'd have gotten a hundred dollar, and second thing is he wasn't one to talk. Mom was ripe with me when they got married, my birthday was a month after of the same year. Sometimes papa put his trust in God when he didn't have no other choice, but for the most part as best as I can recall they was both members of the bad and undeserving, and thank the Lord they never got, because that wouldn't have helped me on my path. But in my mind I play what if, and I think, what if I brought this Jean home with her kid already made, and it ain't even mine and I say, papa, I love her. What would he tell me to do? I imagine I'm him and giving me advice. I say to me, be careful, and keep 'em both on a short leash.

I went to work all week thinking I should have thought up something sooner to do with Jean. I have to say I don't really know what other folks is like, so it might not make sense to say she was all I thought about, nagging on me like a woman, not her, but me, in my own head, at work, home, Tuesday Bible meeting, everywhere. It was so strong, I knew I better be a little cautious of her, even suspicious. Not just anybody make a man feel bound like that. Strings is pulled, but, who is pulling them?

Some days of work that interim week was not special. I was much the same as far as how I performed my job while pretty much distracted. Jonathan, who we call Monkey, tells me come down to earth, I say what, he says stop spacing out or your gonna loose your fingers in the engine. I don't counter him 'cause I know him all

my life, we went to grade school together. I defended him when other kids was putting snots on his hamburger at lunch. If he says I'm spacing out, I'm spacing out. It got me in trouble one day. It could have been worse, but, every bit of trouble is a wake up call. Losing a job can twist your life in all directions. No one I know can really afford to be proud.

I guess my mind was elsewhere on Wednesday. I made two bad splices on the heat bar. Two spools ran out. If I was at the top of my game, I wouldda seen that I was going to have to take one bobbin off a little before it ran out, because another was getting low at the same time. What ended up happening was that both bobbins ran out at the same time and I had to scramble. So I made two quick and sloppy heat splices, which came loose when they got inside the big rope winding engine. I heard this "babump, babump, babump," and the sound of heavy things slapping together. "Shit," I thought, "this hasn't happened since I started working here." The supervisor was out that day. I was lucky. I ruined a whole spool of nylon rope destined for the coast guard. That is, a bobbin with about two miles on it, may as well just throw away, it was a frayed tangled mess. Jimmie, who didn't like me because I didn't joke much, took it on himself to supervise me. He came up and tried to fix the tangle on the machine, but it was wound around the engine belt, and he just went crazy. He took his wrench and held it behind his head like he was going to belt me with it. I grabbed a metal rod I use to pry snags loose from the engine and held it the same way. I know Jimmie. He's all bluster. But he made me so angry, threatening like that over an honest mistake. I knew he was just going to throw the wrench aside, which he did. My feelings was held back, but just. If he'd made a hint of that muscle on his forearm contracting like I knew it had to, to swing that wrench down on me, I was going to cleave

his brain in two pieces. Someone like that doesn't ever learn until its too late.

I put my rod down when He whipped the wrench across the room. "Sorry, Jimmy," I said.

Me and Jean met in the parking lot at night outside of the Grange hall. What a weird place, I thought, before I realized how judgmental I was being. After all, there are all sorts of clubs; Masons, Shriners, Gold Star Mothers, Legionaires, Grange, and they all do good, social work, and raise money for good causes. Why, I heard the pastor had approached Shriners for a lump of money to help a woman and her children out of an abusive situation. So these groups do well intended work. Though I'm always a little cautious when I hear about some group coming in and interfering in a family, because of some so called abuse. I believe there is such a thing as discipline, though I gather its not real popular right now. I remember my mother saying that secret societies harbor sin. I think that maybe we all got the grange. We're Christians. In the same way, I think maybe all groups are secret evil societies. I didn't always think that way, but I was enlightened, like I think a lot of people will be before too long. My experience of truth came when I was up fishing with a barber from Bangor Maine who my father grew up around, him a poor man but just taking an interest in other people's lives, not like people today, who just want to get away from each other. He showed me the soda drink Moxie, which he said they gave to the Christians in the service at the canteen, those few who wouldn't drink beer or spirits. And when we was driving in his woody station wagon to a northern lake to fish perch, he showed me a whole string of houses that was all overgrown with big fields going to seed like no one was there. Big stretches, with farm houses on them, but boarded up. He said to me, "see all them houses

and land? That's bought up by the communists, and when they want, they're all gonna move in, legal and they're gonna own the whole country 'cause they all ready bought it up a farm at a time." I think now maybe he was nuts and I was just a kid. I got no time for fun and fishin now, just work and getting what I need. What I find most true is that God hates wasting time. The truth is, I'm looking to get mated up, legally and right, in the eyes of God. Because, in this world, if we can pull anything out of the toilet that ain't shit, you're golden.

Inside the Grange, there was all sorts of people I know from living my whole life here. Some I went to school with, others I knew from church. I didn't see anyone from work, but that didn't surprise me. If it didn't have drinking or loud music or fighting, they wouldn't be interested. Church people kept amongst themselves mostly, though that group didn't really include me. I'd been a member of the church for years but still when we'd meet, even after church service, they'd be holding back their friendship. They'd be polite, but I got the feeling they wanted to get away from me. My feeling was, they could see how deeply I was committed to the Lord, and their commitment was just for show.

"Hi, Frank," I said when I saw the friendly face I'd known longer than just about anyone, "where's your chowder?"

"Oh, I didn't make one this year. I figure give some other folks a chance at the prize."

He shook my hand in a hold like a wrestler. His hands were more scuffed up than mine. A life of taking apart cars at his garage made them like claws. Still, his friendship was honest. He'd been the school bus driver all through my grade school years, and that's where I really knew him from. It was funny seeing him out like this, because he was cleaned up, his hair was combed and he wore a

suit. Everyone else was just dressed normal, but he always dressed up, like he had to make up extra for being so dirty on the job. "Do you pick a winner than?" Every year there'd be a popular vote on the best chowder. The winner got a cruise around the harbor for an afternoon. "I think Mrs. Ifamy is the best bet. Its not the healthiest with a skim of butter on top, but you can't beat the flavor and the thickness. Almost as good as I made." Then he laughed, because he knew how funny it sounded, a man like him having airs about cooking. "Are you gonna introduce me to your friend?" He'd been giving side glances to Jeannie. I would have introduced her eventually, but Frank made me look silly. Because I knew him so well, I knew he didn't do it on purpose. I dropped it in my mind.

"Oh, sorry, Frank, this is Jean, a lady from church, this is Frank, used to drive our school bus."

"Pleased to meet you," she shook his hand. "We just came in. We haven't tried anything yet. You say Mrs. Ifamy makes the best?"

We sampled some chowders and Mrs. Ifamy walked away with the prize. I took Jean home in the car and we said a prayer together before she went in. It was a good first date. She met someone, Frank, who knew me and she got to see he respected me to talk to.

We had two more dates. One on a Saturday afternoon. I rented a boat for a few dollars from the town landing, and we went out to House Island to have a picnic of sandwiches on the beach there. The other time, we went for a Sunday drive to Pemaquid, where there's a lighthouse, and excavation of an Indian settlement. I saw it on TV on things to do in the summer. By then I could tell she thought I was really nice. I figured it was time I met her child,

Jamie. I'm a little clumsy around kids. I don't usually have much to say to them, but I prepared to talk simple and thought up simple things to say.

When I arrived at her apartment, which was really the first floor of a house, she invited me in and gave me a cold lemonade in her kitchen. I sat at the table there as she called Jamie, who came paddling into the room on her own from the dining room. She made a squealing sound, because she was happy to see company.

"Aren't you a little ball of..." I started to say to her like I'd planned, but before I could get my sentence out, Jamie was taking her clothes off and throwing them at me, laughing. If she had been mine, I would have slapped her and put her in the closet. I looked away from her, then at Jean, who saw how red in the face and angry I was.

"Jamie, no!" You put your clothes back on!" Jean turned to me, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. Jamie!" She jumped from her post at the counter and grabbed the child dragging her into the other room amid a high pitched scream, coming back to gather up the clothes and throw them back at her. "Dress! Now!" More whining and screams.

"See how it is?" trying to smile as she came back into the room, Jamie, dressed again and curled up with a favorite blanket on the living room couch. "God saw fit to put this on me," Jean said, "for the sins I commit, God give me a sinful child."

I couldn't say anything, because that's how I felt too. It wasn't my sin that caused it, it was Jean's. So I decided right then, if I was going to be with Jean, Jamie would remain her cross, not mine, or mine to share.

We were married in the church where we worshipped, where we met.

There was scripture read and hymns sung, and the piano player for Sunday service came and played the Wedding March and that was good because Jean liked music, she said. It was all like taken from a book on weddings. I gave the pastor a piece of scripture and something I wrote about duty and punishment for him to read at the service, but he looked it over and said he wouldn't read it, without even saying why, just shook his head and said, "I'm sorry, but I won't read this." I even gave him fifty dollars for his marrying us, and he hardly thanked me. And Baptist preachers are suppose to marry their flock, I never heard of one asking a charge, like the rabbis I hear do, or justice of the peace, that's shameful. But I paid him my hard earned money, even though he was supposed to do it anyway. He married us, but he hardly looked me in the eyes, and I could see he made some opinion on me. I know once someone decides on you its never going to change. I decided right then that this man was not doing God's work, and that we'd, Jean me and Jamie, be better off learning the word and will of God at home.

We celebrated by spending three days at the motel in Brunswick. We neither of us could afford it, but since you only get married once, I bit down on my lip and said it would be all right. We ate out and drove around to some scenic sights but I didn't really pay attention because I was worried about money. When our three days was up I figured we were finished getting married and it was a relief. Jean's neighbor Pearl had watched Jamie for Jean while we were gone, and I was grateful we didn't have her with us.

As attracted as I was to Jean at first, things changed when there was a child out of wedlock, and when I met the creature. I still felt it strong to look at Jean, but there was always a wall of sin that came between our bodies and I

would have to turn away. When I told her why I couldn't, she understood, and I knew she found some solace for her sins in prayer. Still, our marriage was strong, because I could see Jean truly wanted to walk with God, and I required some comfort for my loneliness.

I let my room go where I was living, because Jean's rooms came with her neighbor, who would come and sit with Jamie while Jean worked. I didn't have much to move in and managed in a few carloads.

We stopped attending church on Sundays. We found the day better spent reading the Bible. For distraction, there was Christian radio which broadcast music, sermons, and Christian talk shows, like Bob Larson, who spoke mostly about the sinfulness of media and corruption of children. On the two days we weren't at work, Jamie weighed heavy on us. Despite that I let its caretaking up to Jean, its noise, sinful nature and presence stirred me up so much that sometimes, I had to go out and walk around the block by myself.

Then one Sunday afternoon, something happened where I just had to step in and take control. Jamie was making her noises while we were trying to study the Bible at the kitchen table. She just kept crying and crying. We tried to ignore her. But then I smelled it. The air filled with the odor. I looked through the doorway to the living room from my seat and there was Jamie, holding a handful of her own poop and looking up at the framed picture of Jesus we have on the wall behind the sofa. Before I could do anything, she launched her missile and it splattered blasphemously across the beautiful face and robe of our Lord Jesus.

"God damn fuckin, God damned fuckin," I yelled, "stop the God damn fuckin mess!" like a cork come out of a bottle. I turned the radio on. Like a

message from our vengeful Lord, there's Bill Larson on the Christian station, and he's on a roll about how the devil gets in the young. But for what I got to do I don't need no Bill Larson talking over my shoulder. I flipped the dial and landed on some of Satan's music and I turned it up loud. I don't know what to do next for a second, and its so cramped and small in here. Then I see the oven's still on because we heated it up on broil to make some mini-pizzas for dinner. I grab that devil's bitch by the arm in the other room and pull her in the kitchen. She yelped but I held on tight. She pushed and kicked, but I'm bigger and stronger and I get her jammed in the oven and a chair back wedged against the oven door like its all one move. Now its not so loud but for the music, Jamie's screaming is real far away. I can see her through the oven window. She presses a hand against the glass, its like I can hear a hiss, though I know I can't really hear it. She jerks it away fast, mouth in that muffled scream still, she leaves the skin of her palm and fingers stuck on the glass, it curls up and a piece falls off like fried potato skins. "I'm sending you home sweetheart!" I'm yelling and I'm spitting and spraying, in my mind I see the dumbest kid in grade school who used to drool and spray when he talked, while I'm yelling and noticing Jean there for the first time. Its hard to believe how all different things come together in a single mind at once, but that's the way excitement works.

Jean looks real white, but she don't look like she wants to fight me, in fact, its something else. She starts moving her hips to the music and liking it. I see the power it has. I changed the station because the devil is in the music. I see the devil's strength is of the world and that's what I needed. Jamie is

throwing herself against the insides of the oven, but I don't care now because Jean has unzipped my pants and is rubbing me, and I'm hard. She takes her pants and panties off and we do it hard and fast on the floor, the music loud, can't hear Jamie, us, grunting and moaning.

When we finished she sat on the floor against the cabinets with a look that might have meant she was thinking nothing or everything. I figure she was wondering if she got rid of one child just to make another. Anyway, I turned the oven off, then I walked out the front and go to the pay phone beneath the streetlight. At first I almost curse again, but then I remember you don't need a quarter to call 911. I call them, and I tell them what I done and where I am.

What I did was unlawful. I'm not going to run from that, though I could if I had the mind to. The important thing is, have you done God's will? Its him put the Devil in the world, by letting him choose. I done what I done in the heat of the moment, yet I was clear as a bell. Like faith, I won't know 'till I see my maker if I threw sin back in the Devil's face, or God's.

Hall Sweep

In the hall again. What was it this time? No jingling of the dog collar. Just the loud mumbling sound that through the door sounded like “Bah-da Bah-da,” him talking to his wife in Hebrew or Russian or something else. Then the pause, the door slamming loudly, reverberating through the stairwell like an amplifier, and the heaviest feet in the world, descending the stair.

“Doctor my ass,” Todd thought from his apartment across the hall. Landlord said he was anyway. He also said, “their money’s just as green,” in his best codger landlord voice. Foreign. Todd tried to figure out from the name on the mailbox downstairs. Allan Zadig. Knew no more than when he went to look at it. Never seemed to work, always home on any day Todd had off. From the journals that piled up on the first floor landing, which ultimately Todd had to take care of and recycle, it could be assumed that Allan Zadig was a doctoral candidate. And not of medicine, like the landlord thought, but history. And twice a month, two nursing periodicals came and sat on the floor there for two or more days until they were taken in. Ellen Zadig was the name on them. So Allan stayed at home while his wife, who Todd rarely saw, went off to work at an area hospital. That’s how Todd had it figured.

Todd pulled the curtain to his front window back and watched Zadig leave the building. He waited for the sound he expected and still it was jarring, the front door slamming way too hard. A week after they’d moved in, the glass in the front got shattered, and Todd knew it was from the slamming. No one took responsibility.

There was Allan Zadig, on the front steps holding a gym bag, looking up and down the street, seeing where he parked his oversized RUV, FUV Todd called them.

Big, wasteful, obnoxious, like the way Zadig was built, Todd thought looking at him

as he beeped his car alarm.

The coast was clear. Todd opened his front door and looked out in the hallway. It was already a God damned mess. He'd just swept it. The dog hair was packed into the corners and the mats were covered with tumble weeds. "God damn it!" Todd yelled in the hall, breathed a sigh, and then brought his broom and dustpan to dutifully collect the dust and hair.

Every time he had to take out trash or clean up, or change a light bulb or adjust a timer, he did a calculation in his head. It never seemed to come out to be worth the time, but he did it any way, because he didn't feel he could turn down work.

There was the sound of stirring around the door of one of the apartments. Then a door opened on the next floor down. He was on the stairs between the second and third floor, working his way down with the broom to the metal dustpan he put on the first floor landing. This planning his strategy was like mowing a lawn in a certain way, seeing the rows and patterns develop, and the job getting done.

Nancy, half of a lesbian couple, stuck her head out the door and looked up at Todd. He hadn't put on his Walkman so it was hard to ignore her. "Hello," he said to her. "How are you doing today?" without stopping his work.

"Fine. Just checking who was in the hall." She closed her door without any small talk. That was fine with Todd. She wasn't the worst. He didn't mind her. He generally disliked being seen working here. It made him feel like the super or handy man everyone asked things of. He wasn't the super. He just did some things around the building for a cut on the rent. He had a day job, just like everyone else. But the assumption was, he told himself as he swept, that his job couldn't be as good as any of theirs. After all, he was taking out their garbage.

Someone else comes out, the door swings open, then closes most of the way. Todd could see inside through the crack but the smell of incense emanated from it like something was being covered up. He hated incense. They were always certain kinds of people who liked it, like people who smoked clove cigarettes, and did other pretentious and youthful things. Todd thought about the couple in apartment three. A young, maybe twenty-three year old recent college graduate who he assumed worked in an office at one of the schools. The male was considerably older. He had graying hair which was modishly over the ears, and a beard with mustache. Round glasses finished the picture of a college professor, recently separated from a wife, in the throws of a crisis, living with a former student of his. The smell of youth covering old age seeding.

Todd finished sweeping and quickly got back into his apartment before anyone else could come out. He turned on his TV set, turned it up and waited for more sounds in the hall.

He wanted to close them out with their noises. Only Julia on the first floor made him feel anything but complete aversion. He'd been interested in her since he moved in. The landlord joked about her tendency to gab, warning him, "she'll talk your ear off with her stories about the war, and Mengele. Don't start unless you've got plenty of time."

"You mean Joseph Mengele?" Todd revealed his fascination.

"Oh, yeah, she knew him well. You see, she was a French dancer, and during the war, helped get Jews out of the occupied countries forging papers and all sorts of exciting things. But she got caught. Mengele had an interest in dancers and athletes though, so instead of being executed, she was sent to him. Great stories she has. Just don't expect a short visit!" He laughed his codger laugh.

Todd had finally found himself invited into her apartment one day while sweeping her landing. He went straight to his questions about Mengele.

“He was a sick man,” she said, “yes, a sick man. But he was always very polite. He would always say hello, how are you feeling, and listen to you if you answered. Then he’d go on to tell you exactly what he was going to do to you. In my case, he was interested in my legs, because I was a dancer. He would inject dye into them to watch the blood flow under water, or in cold, or exercising. I think the purpose was to study some possibilities for troops in cold, or deprived of food, and so forth. But I always had the feeling he was doing it just for himself. I had always been one of his pets. You see, he liked to collect people. He had a midget and an acrobat who followed him around. Oddities to amuse him in moments of his dullness. He got bored with them eventually and then they’d be shot. In a while, he’d come by with a new one tagging along. I could have been his little dancer! But then, I wouldn’t likely be here talking to you today! More wine?”

There was a flat, matter-of-factness about the way Julia spoke of her experiences that thrilled Todd in a special way. She had survived so much. Maybe what made these events bearable was the fact that she could pour another glass of wine with a smile if she chose, while Mengele could not. That was enough for her. And she showed a kind of pride in reciting her tales, even a fondness when remembering who others call the “angel of death.” But, this was Todd interpreting.

“Mengele sounds like an interesting man!” Todd said with awe.

“I don’t think interesting comes to mind first. Or maybe it was the way you said it.” She had looked at him puzzled.

Todd had a spare room. That meant, a room that wasn’t filled with

necessities like stove, bed, television or boxes of belongings. He put a sixty watt bulb in the single ceiling fixture and left it bare. There was nothing on the walls, nothing but the off white paint, already there. A door over two file cabinets made a desk for him. A chair he'd found in the building basement made a perfect addition, a cloth covered seat with years of dust and plaster crumbs ground into the weave, with a slight smell of urine. The effect was that of a sparsely furnished hermit's cave. Todd could have covered the walls with posters and what not, but the frugal appearance of this room was no less than exactly how he wanted it. It gave both clarity and stillness to his mind to do something he rarely felt he could; focus. The bad smell and poor illumination brought him back to a childhood place, a hole in the basement where pipes passed through, escape from his father, and chores, and fear. Then like now, materials of his interest spread out on a flat rock in his cement hole, candle flickering, now his zerox pages, collated and studied on his tabletop door, dim light casting mild shadows of Todd and the sheets as he raised them. Great mysteries emit their own light, some things could be read in the dark, he thought.

Todd had started reading Shakespeare. Insecurity was as strong a motivation for Todd as anyone else. He found the language illusive. Try as he might, he missed some basic assumption of the writing. Rather than retard his progress, it drove him forward. Not toward Shakespeare, but toward the sources of thoughts expressed. They were many, and ample amounts for a mostly superficial research. These sources, names like Nashe, Robert Greene, and Burton among others supplied contemporary points of view, the received knowledge Shakespeare carved his characters with. The humors, such as melancholy, the

sanguine, choleric and phlegmatic described behaviors associated with racial and national types. These biases went back to Hippocrates, Aristotle, and other generations of trend setters. Racial evolution and political truisms may have been false, but not for Todd. He followed Shakespeare right through to Gobineau, Madison Grant, Houston Chamberlain and Galton, the pillars of racial thought right into the twentieth century. Understanding the real meaning of this thought stream was beyond Todd, but it was a river he could swim, like so many others, in the shallows.

He sat and read until his eyes hurt. He felt like going out, maybe have a drink at a bar, but it would be noisy, and the bartender would be watching how he drank. He wished she hadn't left. Even though now he could be completely how he wanted to be. Everything here was him now. Some things he hadn't even shown her the tip of. It was good to be alone. He wanted a drink, but the thought of how it changed his mind frightened him. He'd become self critical and go into a panic and want to sleep, and not be able to. He wanted to feel right, all the time.

There was the smell of food, then smoke. They were always burning food across the hall! Todd left his spare room and went into his living room. The television was on, a sitcom. They were all the same. People living in apartment buildings together, their love lives and inlaw problems, or five living in one apartment, taking cold showers and finding out they were adopted. Todd didn't laugh with the studio audience.

The building fire alarm went off. Todd punched the off button on the television set and ran out of the apartment, down the stairs and out the front. He didn't want to confront the neighbors now. It was just their cooking... let the fire engine come. Todd got to his car parked on the street and drove away

as fast as he could.

Somewhere after Keene, New Hampshire Todd pulled off of the road across from a house with a "Yard Sale" sign nailed to a tree and a couple of tables on the front lawn. He got out of his car and walked across the road to a man sitting in a lawn chair, baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, hands knit together on his lap. Todd approached him, expecting the man to say something which he didn't. He wondered if he was dead, or sleeping. The collection on the tables was so assorted as to say little about the owner. There were three glass doorknobs on one table, next to a stack of forty-five records. There was a cigar box filled with rusty jackknives and a ratchet set with some pieces missing. Leaning against the second table was a rifle. Todd picked it up and held it to his shoulder. It was light. The wooden stock was cut thin. There was a feather sight that snapped up with side pieces. There was a five bullet magazine, bolt loaded and a black barrel with Japanese characters along it.

The old guy in the chair said, "that thing killed more than a few Americans, ah-ha -ha." He pushed his baseball cap back and looked at Todd fondling the gun. "When they ran out of bullets in the jungle, they'd load their own. And if they didn't have leads, they'd pack their shells with wooden slivers and rocks. Some soldiers got nasty wounds from that." The old man looked Todd up and down in an obvious once over, so common to him he didn't even bother to do it while Todd was looking away. "You like that gun, don't ya?"

"I like the sights," Todd said flipping them up and out again.

"Yup, they're something. So simple but lined up right just as accurate as a scope. Now you know this thing don't fire."

Todd held the gun a little farther out from himself, like it was suddenly

distasteful to him. "Oh. Its broken somewheres?"

"No, no. its perfect. You can't get the caliber bullet for it, you see.

But I been told a 308 shell would work if you packed it yourself with a smaller lead. You don't want it blowing up in your face." He could see this didn't interest Todd any longer. "Its really just a show piece, an oddity." He was silent for a moment. "I wasn't going to sell it at all, but my wife put it out. Like lots of this stuff." He swept his arm through the air. "She thinks I been living in the past. I'm seventy eight now. See, she says if I want to live to a hundred, I'd better start thinking about the future. Now do I look like I want to live to a hundred? Ha! But you know how it is. Gotta keep the peace. You married?"

"Um, no."

"Yup. Didn't think so."

Todd put the rifle back down against the table and turned to leave.

"I got something inside you might like."

Todd stopped.

"You just hold on. I'll be back." The old man squeezed out of his chair and went inside his house, door swung loose behind him on its broken spring. Todd tried to open some of the rusted jackknives on the table. The old man returned with a shoe box and sat down on his lawn chair. "This here was my father's. He was a policeman in Chicago." He opened the box to show a 38 revolver. The cracked wooden handle looked like it was made out of dirt, blackened with years of sweat and crumbling at the edges. The grain had disappeared, turning it into an undifferentiated mass, the way an organ's cells turn into cancer. "This was his personal gun. See how it fits your hand."

Todd picked up the gun and liked the way it felt.

"I'll throw in a box of shells," said the old man.

Todd put on "Finlandia" driving to work. He turned it up loud, partly from habit of loud listening and partly due to his diminishing hearing. He spent much of it on amplified music as a teenager, but now it had entered his conscious mind, that he would finish the job and deafen himself with bombastic orchestral sounds. He came to see aggression and identity were associated with symphonic music at some points as much as his voices of teenage angst. But the symphonic moved with nations. Thank God for libraries, he thought, with their out of print books and zerox machines.

Todd parked his Dart next to the forklift driver Joe Singleton's Ford pickup with the board for a front bumper. The parking lot was only a quarter full. Todd was early this time. He hoped it would be noticed. When he got into the front room where the punch clock was, the supervisor was not in sight. Damn. He was usually trying to dodge him. Todd punched in. He had a few minutes before they started up the line. He sat at one of the lunch tables in the room. There were half a dozen other workers littered randomly around, waiting for work, the anticlimax they faced every day after waking, washing and coming in to the bottling plant. Todd used to like Coca Cola. He looked across the way at Tony, a typical long term. Tony nodded, sipping a cola. He had the pallor. It was like working at an asbestos mine, or on an insecticide spray truck, you got exposed. By ten o'clock every morning, Todd's skin was sticky from soda vapor and spray that made the air in the plant feel humid. By eleven it started feeling waxy, like his skin had reached a saturation point. In another few hours it was sticky again. His lower eyelids hadn't begun to sag yet, where you could see the pink or red inside rim. That took longer. The effect of these changes was a general uniformity of the appearance of

the workers that, outside of the labor loop, you'd find hard to characterize. This uniformity extended to behavior as well, with loss of conversation ability and lack of humor first.

Work. He got up from the table went through the door onto the main floor as the eight o'clock bell rang out. He took his place on the line loading on empty bottles from crates. He'd do this most of today. On some days they'd shift workers around to keep them from falling asleep. Sometimes he'd fill canisters with pressurized Coke syrup. This was the concentrated formula they mixed with water at fast food restaurants. That's why Coke at a fast food restaurant taste like chlorine; its tap water. Todd couldn't drink the stuff anymore. He took plenty of it in through his skin.

There was Joe Singleton. He was loading up pallets of coke bottles for the line, and canisters for the special platform where that work was performed.

Todd had seen Joe forced to eat it before the weekend. Todd didn't hold anyone here in any special regard, but Joe at least physically demanded it. He was enormous, over three hundred pounds easily, standing six feet tall. He was balding on the top of his head, but his beard was thicker than most people's scalp. Him on his forklift seemed redundant. He looked like he could overpower any machine they could chain him to. But last week, he'd gotten his fork wedged under a stack of pallets and couldn't angle it out. He got off his fork and tried prying it loose by hand. In exasperation, he threw his crowbar against the cement floor. "God fucken damn it!" he hollered, breathing heavy from effort.

Immediately there was a supervisor before him, a small Asian woman wearing a white lab coat. "What's the problem?" she asked tersely like a command, not a question.

"Nothing. Fork's stuck." Joe was slumped and sheepish.

“Fix it then. And pick that up,” pointing to the crowbar. “No more outbreaks from you. You’ve been warned.” She walked away and went up a flight of stairs to the side, to the mirror windowed office.

Joe looked around at the same time he averted his eyes, dutifully and quietly going about freeing the fork. He looked to be ten inches high.

That kind of flash of life was so rare here Todd knew it’d be the single object of talk for weeks. Before the return to “how’s your machine running” talk that predominated. Todd felt knocked down being a witness to Joe’s scolding. He wondered if everyone felt it, except the supervisor. Shit, Joe could have cracked her spine in three places with one blow, anywhere else, well, in nature. Todd found himself putting a cracked bottle on the belt. He caught it before it slipped up the line. That was a close call. He’d better try to concentrate on his work, he told himself.

Back home Todd had reached his limit with the neighbors, their noises, smells and other invasions of his life. He loaded his gun and ran through the apartment in a tear. Through this wall in the bedroom was Zadig’s baby nursery. Aim low, he might hit it in its crib. He ran to his kitchen. In the parallel apartment, maybe he’d hit the wife cooking. He ran into the living room. Through the floor here, he might nail Mr. Professor smoking a joint or in an easy chair listening to Bob Dylan. Through the bedroom floor, the twenty-three year old girlfriend might get struck down masturbating. He charged into the hall down the stairs. Right side, nail a dyke with a slug. Quickly, first floor, through the door, Julia might catch one in the gut crossing the room with her walker. The other side of the landing, Todd didn’t know. Waste a stranger? Back up the stairs to the second floor up the third, aiming his gun, finally going back into his own apartment slamming the door, on his knees in the living room with the gun

under his chin. That's the answer! Everyone in the world at once!

Philip

“As long as you live under this roof you’ll do what I tell you,” each word punctuated like a human telegraph.

“I already quit!”

“You what?” Harold took a swing at his son. Philip ducked and the force of the unconnected blow almost toppled Harold. The fact that he was drunk contributed to his imbalance and he fell forward, stopping himself against the wall with both hands.

Philip saw his opportunity so close to the front door, and quickly shot out, going down the steps in a single bolt. He had become agile in avoiding punches. Harold staggered into the open night air, distant cars, peepers. “You leave, don’t ever think you come back!” He waited for a few minutes; part the slowing effect of too much beer, part expecting an answer and a submissive return to the punishment. But there was nothing. Harold had chased him up the road before. Philip was half a mile away now.

Philip wasn’t sad, but he was feeling things, freedom had a feeling. Free from Harold, free from school, free to do what he wanted, that was the feeling. He was still running. Fifteen minutes later he’d run himself out. He stopped on the deserted road and leaned over, hands on knees, breathing hard and coughing, his lungs burned so much from the effort. Sometimes Mr. Pendelton would run kids raw like this in gym class at school. Philip thought about it. No more. No more Mr. Pendelton, no more pushed around. He looked up the road, illuminated by the sparsely located street lights. No houses, just trees and the road to town. This was his prospect. It was night, Philip figured it must be about nine o’clock, traffic gave no indication. This back way between Cushing and Thomaston was mostly traveled by folks coming

or going home, and no one was out at this hour on a weeknight except gas station attendants and all night grocers. He wouldn't hitch a ride anyway. He was his own man, at fourteen.

Philip's freedom was not without reason. As he caught his breath, he realized he needed his clam fork, basket and boots. They were in the shed at home. Never locked, all he had to do was get there and get in without getting nabbed. He knew that his father would treat him no different now than a trespasser. There was no fooling around with Harold. He'd done time for protecting "me and mine." Maybe tonight wouldn't be a good time to return for his things. Harold might be sitting up drinking and getting nastier. Philip got off easy tonight. He didn't want to press his luck. His things would still be there the next night.

He looked off the side of the road at the endless trees. He'd have no trouble finding protection tonight. Protection right now just meant not being home. The woods would provide because no one would see him. He knew he'd need something more substantial eventually. Nights could get cold, and it could rain. But for tonight, this would be good. Anywhere here. He breathed normally now. He stood up straight and looked down the road, its downward slope and gentle snaking, and the upward rise that took it out of sight. The way to town. It was still early. And he wasn't tired. He reached in his pocket. He still had cash from claming last night's low tide. In town, Thomaston. Not much happening. If he could get to Rockland, he knew a gas and grocery store that was open late, where they'd sold him beer before. He'd see how far he could get. Even if it was tomorrow morning, he thought, he should celebrate his freedom somehow. Once, he'd hitched from Augusta to town after getting wasted and not but one car gave him a ride. He walked straight through the night into the next day, but he did it. It wouldn't be the

end of the world if he had to walk.

It was a cool spring night. Philip was wide awake, he couldn't have sacked out for the night if he wanted to. He pushed on, and in a while, he saw headlights behind him. He turned around and put out his thumb. People always drove too fast on this road. Philip turned away and continued walked before the car had reached him. He was surprised when the car slowed quickly and pulled over to the shoulder just beyond him. Dane Benner reached over to the passenger side and popped the door open as Philip reached for the handle. "Door sticks," he said. "Get in."

Philip was glad to see a friendly face. "Working 'late shift tonight?"

"yeah. Sort of." Dane worked as a fireman in Thomaston. Though he infrequently went out, there were usually a few of them on duty at the station. Some were single and liked to hang around, even when they weren't scheduled for duty. They sat in folding chairs out on the tar, and sometimes swilled beer in the evening, watching the cars pass. "You going to town?"

"Yeah. Naw. "Think I'm going to Rockland."

"Why don't you stop in at the station? Have a brewski?"

"You sure?" Philip could think of no reason not to.

"Sure I'm sure. We gotta case in the frig." Dane gave Philip beers plenty of times. It wasn't really like he was corrupting him. Philip was one of those bad kids who did everything early. "We'll put some tunes on in the station house. Bill and Bud are there too. Of course, we might have to go out on a fire." He laughed like it was a punch line.

"Unless ya burn the station down," Philip joked.

"We just might tonight. Hey, you can draw some pictures of Bill and Bud

like last time, and watch them get pissed off.”

Philip reached in his pockets and found his wad of lined paper, and ink pen. He always had paper and pen for drawing. Whenever he felt really bad, he’d draw a picture of something stupid or violent, and he’d immediately feel better. Sometimes he drew things just to make people laugh. He knew he wasn’t good like people in books, but he drew good enough to surprise himself. With a few drinks, his caricatures could get pretty funny. “Say, do you think you could find a pad of paper around the station?”

“Sure, sure.” They were at the station in minutes. Dane parked on the street. In front of the open door and engine no. 71 sat two men in folding chairs, one middle aged, the other younger, both stocky with thick mustaches. They had cans of beer clenched in fists held inside their legs, like they were conscious of the image of an on-duty fireman openly drinking.

“Hey, Dane!” yelled Bill, the older of the two. “We sold your seat, you lazy bum!” Bud went and got two more chairs as Dane and Philip got out of the car. “And you brought our mascot.”

“Only beer drinking Dalmatian I ever seen,” Bud said.

“Ha! How many firehouses you been around?” Bill laughed as he went inside to retrieve two more beers.

When he came back, they toasted. “To pissing out fires everywhere!” Dane raised his can and everyone mock clinked them together in the air.

“What brings you out tonight, Philip, middle of the week and all?” Bud asked.

“He wants to draw you two,” Dane interrupted.

“No, I...” Philip didn’t want to look boyish to them. “I quit school and then I

got throwd out of the house. And I'm not going back. But that's all right. I got work."

There was a long silence.

"Shit, don't stop having fun now. I don't care. I'm not all lonesome and shit. I'll draw ya. Bill, I'm gonna draw Bud looking really stupid." Philip took out his wad of paper, unfolded it running his fingernail along the creases to smooth it out and found his pen.

"Wait a minute, your dad threw you out?" Dane had lost his humor.

"Yeah, 'cause I quit school."

"Why'd you quit school?"

"Dad said I had to be an architect, study drafting because I could draw. Fuck that."

"There are worse things."

"I quit to fuck him up."

"He shouldn't have thrown you out, anyway." Dane looked away, distracted by some memory of his own. "You go home. He'll take you back. Shit, I'll go with you."

"No. You don't know him. I'll be all right. Thanks anyway. He started drawing Bud. He was smiling now. It was clear he was exaggerating some features on Bud's face by his broad strokes of the pen.

"Still..." Dane knew it was true, Harold wouldn't want anything to do with Philip now. He'd had a run in with Harold years ago. He knew exactly what he was like.

"Look fella, if we can do anything," Bill joined in, "you come down here. Any of us help you out, you know that. Where you gonna stay?"

"My aunt lives in Rockland," Philip lied. "I'm gonna stay with her for awhile."

"You wouldn't be trying to bullshit a bullshitter, would you?" Dane ruffled.

"Awe, no, I'm staying with my aunt."

"Dane swatted at Philip's head with no real force.

Philip finished his drawing and handed it to Dane.

"Ha! He's all nose!" Dane doubled over, Bud made a sour face.

"Why don't you draw how Dane looks to you? Bud asked, snatching the drawing from Dane's hands.

"Jesus, Philip."

"I'm sorry," Philip said all hangdog.

"No, no." Bud shook his head, waving his hand. "That's not important.

I mean, this is good. Its a cartoon, but, hey, I'm no genius and I can see it.

And you dropping out of school... I've said it before but maybe now its pressing... you've got some talent, you can't just fuck off with it."

"Maybe I can draw more clams to dig," Philip joked, but everyone just looked at the ground.

"Tell you what," Bud continued. "I got a niece that goes to Portland School of Art. She paints. I can't say I know what she's doing, but other people think its something. And there are a lot of people at the school who are talented, like you. Anyway, she says. Maybe I could get in touch with her, and she could show you around. Maybe even meet teachers, show them your drawings, I don't know. I know they think a lot of her there." He looked for a reaction on Philip's face, but got none. "Well? What do you think?"

"What's the point? Philip didn't want to be angry tonight. "So I see some rich kids drawing. Then what?"

“Then you go back to school and sweat it out. Do good enough, or better. At least finish. Then maybe you’ll feel different.” Bud felt like he was wasting his breath. “Hey, I don’t want to hassle you. Look, its like this.” Now he was stretching his thought, and after three beers. But he’d remembered he had this conversation with his brother about Lisa going to art school. “This is how it is with people. Some have a talent, others don’t. Me, for instance. I can smell fire before it starts. I charge in, I know just how to act in a fire. These guys here? They had to be taught.” He laughed. “Come on, I’m making a point here! Some people are born with something, others learn what they can to get by. But everyone, talented or otherwise, needs to push themselves, and be pushed, even. My niece was just like you. Its a kind of smarts you’re born with.”

“Smart? Me?” Philip liked the compliment, but it made him uncomfortable, too.

“Yeah. Not just book smart. Born smart. That’s the best kind. But you gotta push it. And some people won’t like you if they see it. ‘Cause they don’t have it. Maybe drafting or architecture isn’t for you. There are people who draw I’m sure. I don’t know how much of a living they make. But, wife, kids, responsibilities, despite all that, sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do.”

“I don’t know what that’s suppose ta mean,” Dane objected. “Sometimes, you gotta do what’s right, too.”

“But quitting school, kid...” Bill was shaking his head, remembering he’d quit school, and the difficulty of having to do the GED, and how hard it’d been getting accepted into a decent training program. He wouldn’t have quit if he’d known the trouble it would cause him. “I mean, trouble at home’s one thing. Quitting school because of your dad, I don’t see it. Its not his life, its yours.” He

hesitated to add what he was thinking, ...you're fucking up, but he thought it loud enough.

Philip looked down at the beer in his hands and reminded himself to drink it. In his mind, he was looking back on the day, how it'd started. His father, yelling about something he couldn't even understand, hung over stupor, getting to school late. And then gym, in the shower last, and someone reaches around him and grabs his balls. He elbows the person hard without even thinking and turns around to find gym instructor Pendilton sitting on his ass on the shower floor, holding his profusely bleeding nose and mouth. That's when Philip quit, with his shirt and his pants in his hands, throwing his clothes on, putting his socks and shoes on outside the school grounds. "Fuckin faggot," Philip thought, knowing no one would believe him. And what would he say anyway? He'd been felt up by a guy? Getting home, and getting thrown out, that was almost welcome, like the plunge into the water of someone who's been dangling a foot. What would his father have said if he'd told him what happened? Call him a queer and throw him out. Same difference. Except no one'd be calling him a queer, this way.

Philip put his empty down on the bar and announced, "I gotta use the can," ejecting himself from thoughts and walking into the station house. The frig was next to the bathroom. Philip opened it silently, took out a Budweiser and put it in his deep pants pocket. He started to close the door and then, almost an afterthought, he reached in, took out two more beers and brought them in the bathroom with him.

He put down the lid of the toilet and sat. A naked woman on a calendar faced him from the back of the door. He picked up one of the beers he'd placed on the floor, opened it and sucked it down in a few powerful gulps. He did the

same to the second, eased both cans down into the waste basket, and went back into the station and out the front.

"Hey, I'm gonna get going to Rockland to my aunt's place before she worries. Thanks for the beer," and he was on his way.

"Think about what I said," yelled Bud after him. "I'll call my niece so you can check out that art school."

"Bye! Come see us. If you need anything," Dane trailed off as Philip disappeared up the street.

"Wadda ya wanna bet he scooped some beer on the way through?" Bud asked.

"Ah, I'd want a buzz too if I was in his shoes. 'Hope his aunt doesn't get upset about the smell on him. That's the last thing he needs, get bounced out of another place tonight," Dane said.

"You believe that horse shit about an aunt?" Bill asked.

Philip stumbled once as the alcohol hit him. After the glare of street lights in Thomaston, on the stretch that was the back way to Rockland and the grocer, Philip swilled the beer he'd dropped into his pocket. It was ice cold and went in sparkling and smooth, like there was something more anticipated and perfect in the fourth drink.

He loved this back way, he'd walked it many times, often with a buzz like this or better. It was only infrequently lit by street lights. There was an old rock quarry along here that had filled with water, unknown to everyone but the locals. The water was as clear as glass. Philip always liked swimming there. Maybe now it would be his bath too. He looked off to the side of the road where a dirt path began to the quarry, then pushed on to Rockland.

In a couple of miles, he could see the light that illuminated the single

pump out in front of his favorite grocer. He was usually open to eleven. Situated on a crossroads, kids often bought their beer here on their way to party in a nearby town, or nightcaps on the way home, some quick drinking before struggling up stairs in sleeping houses.

When Philip was close enough to the grocer's to see by the light, he pulled out the money in his pocket and counted it. A ten, a five, and six ones. He was set. He still needed to get his basket, clam fork and boots, but he remembered what he'd told himself. Not tonight. It would be there tomorrow night. Fucked up, he might trip, fall and make a noise, and Harold would grab him, and that could mean the worse.

The grocer was his usual self when Philip walked up to the register. "What will it be tonight, sir?" almost winking. Philip put a six-pack of Pabst and a quart bottle of Miller on the counter. He knew this fellow didn't think he was over eighteen. He'd been in there once, and the grocer had given him a nod toward the door and directed his eyes toward a customer who was obviously an undercover liquor inspector. Philip had bought a bag of chips and slipped out. But no problem tonight, he was in and out in a couple of minutes, and on his way back to the quarry for the rest of the night.

He was holding off drinking until he was comfortable. There was no rush now. He had the night. He never needed much sleep. As he neared the path to the quarry, he saw the dirt had been turned up, and there were deep tire tracks through the narrow opening in the trees and brush. Motorcycles. He continued down the path, but didn't hear any voices or trashing around that would give the presence of the NSKKK away. When he reached the edge of the quarry, he could see it was deserted, and breathed a sigh of relief. The NSKKK was a

local motorcycle club. Sometimes they'd disappear for months at a time, harassing the occupants of some other town until they got bored. But it looked like they'd been here recently. The tracks around the ledges were like the remnants of a beehive of spinning tires and a preening display of RPMs. Philip sat on a flat cool rock, took his socks and shoes off and looked out over the water. There was a hint of a breeze that made the water ripple, like an invisible giant was gently stirring it with a finger. Philip took out a paper, unfolded it and drew lines with his pen. His first instinct was to draw a cartoon, but instead, he made lines to imitate the moving of the water down below. It gave him a sensation of belonging that wasn't exactly how he thought a home should be, but it reminded him of when he'd felt safest, when his mom was alive. Philip opened a beer and sucked as much as he could quickly and the ghost was dissipated. A couple more beers went down fast, and Philip was where he wanted to be for awhile. He would slow down and maintain, teetering on the edge of nausea and the spins.

There was a half moon. It was good enough light to see the water and undress by, sketching, he would add from his imagination what he couldn't see. He did that better than drawing from life anyway. He picked up his pen and paper again and sketched in a submerged car beneath the rippling waves he'd drawn. Maybe a couple of faces, against the windows, Xs in the eyes, or crossed eyed, cheeks puffed out in a held breath, another farther back in the car, eyes open half way, mouth agape.

Something about that was empowering, though different than feeling safe. He looked to his left and saw a ragged shaped piece of granite. He outlined it on his paper and the sense of safety returned. But when he drew a head dashed in

against it, he was suddenly above nature, and when he put in features of people he knew, it felt like a prophecy; no matter what they might do to him, his word would stand. He was getting perfectly drunk now. He was oceanic. The day fell away.

Philip woke up at dawn. The ground was cool where he lay, but he felt dried out and arid. To stem his thirst, he opened the Miller quart from last night and took a good long drink. It tasted good and made him feel wakeful. He drained the rest of it in a few minutes, took off his clothes, climbed as close to the water as he could get on the ledge, and then jumped in. The cold water made his heart skip a beat and he came to the surface gasping. After the first shock he was invigorated by the cold and when he got out, he was ready to do anything he had to do. Unfortunately, there was little to occupy him this day, until evening came and he was able to retrieve his work gear. He was getting hungry, and worried about smelling. He had a few dollars left, he could buy deodorant, soap, toothpaste, and if he had enough left, a sandwich, or, better yet, a jar of something and a loaf of bread, from the grocer's up the road from the quarry. If his claming clothes were still in the shed at home, he could wash these pants and shirt at the laundry mat in town. He might be all right. And still be free.

He got to the grocer's shortly after opening. He had enough money for all his needs and a little left over, but at the last minute, he decided against beer. He put deodorant on as soon as he left the grocer's and ate a plastic wrapped sandwich while sitting on the tar out front. Then he did something completely on whim. He walked into Rockland and went to the public library.

Like any small town library, the collection of books was random, part donations,

part estate purchases of what particular librarians were interested in themselves. Philip went to the art section and pulled out the four tallest books, and brought them to a table. The first he thumbed through and closed without thought; examples of Swiss graphic design. The second, a selection of Marc Chagall painting didn't stir his interest either. The third volume gave Philip warm recognition. The etchings of Durer struck accord like no familial embrace or physical pleasure he could bring himself to. The sausage legs and distorted postures of tinkers and farmers depicted, the wild, knarled faces and allegory made him see his own elaborations on nature like the car in the quarry, the head against the rock, the embellishments on the faces of friends, in a different light. These etchings showed the stories and histories beneath the moment, the faces revealed a second face that forced up through the first, pushing out a nose to a painful enlargement, or sucking in the eyes to ponder an inner depth. His drawing didn't need to be cartoons. They were something else already. They were X-rays of the world! Philip took out his pen and paper and spent the next few hours copying the etchings from the book, and inventing variations to show his own experience. Before dusk, he looked down at the pages of his work and felt something strong. He liked himself, very much.

Philip caught two rides after he left the library, which brought him all the way to Thomaston. It was dark now. He figured he'd walk the rest of the way to his house a little later. Now he wanted to poke around here and see what he could find for shelter. He walked down a side road lined with houses that led to the town landing on the St. George River. He checked the sheds and bulkheads

on these houses. Some door he found locked. Others were open, but either dogs would start barking, or the voices of the families living there were so close and loud that his presence would be too easily discovered. Even a sneeze might expose him. He went down to the water. He contemplated wedging himself beneath one of the wharves, but, though secure, it would offer little protection from rain, which would seep between the boards, and rodents, which scavenged the rocks for crabs and washed up trash.

He went back toward the center of town. On one side was a church, a small restaurant, post office and then a bar. On the other side of the street was a row of stores, all of which were closed by nightfall. In behind them was a large parking lot, now empty. Off to one corner was a hotdog stand on a little grass island, beside a telephone pole. The stand had been there since Philip could remember, boarded up just like it was now, plywood nailed over the doorway and service window. He hadn't even thought of this. With a little effort, he was able to kick the plywood over the door loose so he could get inside. Once loose, he pounded down the nails so they wouldn't catch on him. He could then put the plywood back in place without it appearing disturbed, though it was loose. The inside was small, about the size of the bathroom at the fire station. It was unfinished and raw wood, musty smelling, but with a floor and room enough to stand. Philip sat, his back against one wall. It was cool in here. He felt protected. He'd stay here. He slept for several hours.

The shed had a sliding door that you could lift outward because it had no runner on the bottom. It didn't make a sound when opened this way. Philip

slipped in through the crack he made at the side. There was a window inside opposite. The moon light that came in illuminated all but the farthest corners. On a rusted metal rack, fixed to the wall with wire and nails were claming clothes his fork basket and boots. He took them down carefully. Even so, the rack rattled as the removed weight shifted the center of gravity. He caught his breath. He needed this stuff. He couldn't alert Harold. He fit all of it in the wooden basket and squeezed back out through the crack. From outside, he could see through the window into the kitchen. He wanted to miss something inside, but there was little there any longer that he cared for. He had a radio upstairs. He missed the white of the walls he guessed. But his mother was gone. And though he liked the idea he could have a man to look to, Harold was only someone he feared and was anxious to get away from. From outside it looked better, because it looked like any other house around here, like it might be a home. Maybe a home was just an idea, after all, everybody thinking everybody else had one; themselves, undeserving. Philip wiped his nose, not tears, but snot, and fled into the night.

Back at the stand with his small hoard of belongings, Philip felt at the end of a journey and the beginning of another.

He changed his clothes and was out on the mud flats by dawn, just when the tide was lowest. He started digging at the edge of the water, getting some cohogs; henclams the size of four steamers. As he worked back to the shore, he filled his basket with clams. He worked hard, digging his fork deep into the mud and turning it over, rarely coming up empty, and placing his fork instinctively a certain distance away from the clam holes so as not to accidentally crush them with the tongs. He rarely stood to straighten his back or stretch, but worked, like someone happy to labor, his preservation and the need to occupy

his hands melding into one motivation, without self subversion.

By noon, Philip was down at the Pit Restaurant on the waterfront, turning his haul in for cash. In back of the kitchen, the cook gave Philip a pitcher of cold beer and a fried seafood platter. Nothing ever tasted so good or well deserved.

When he was finished eating, he went down to the landing and sat on the rocks. He watched the occasional boat go by, some with fishing lines out, trolling for striped bass. He'd never fished like that. He'd cut fish on the pier, and helped on a lobster boat, but the idea of a leisurely fishing was not in his understanding. Once on TV he saw a fishing show where they threw them back after reeling them in. That was stupid, and it didn't even seem fun to him. He wanted to draw, but his paper and pen were in his other pants back at the stand. He couldn't go back in the light of day, because someone was sure to see him and call the police. Or worse, a high school student who knew him might see and spread it around. And who knew what they'd do with it. That got him thinking about Pendilton feeling him up, and Bud's niece in art school. Suddenly the hot dog stand seemed much less, and even smothering. He needed to get more beer, and right away.

Back down at the Pit Restaurant, Philip found the back door still open because the kitchen was so hot. He could see through the screen door that the cook was occupied running plates of fried food up to the counter. He'd have to time it not to coincide with the return to the kitchen. The cook rushed back in suddenly, yanking two wire bins of fried clams out of oil, shook them and dumped them onto plates, and ran off again. Philip darted through the door and into the walk in refrigerator. He took no time but grabbed the nearest six-pack of beer. He was out before anyone saw him, quickly thrusting the beer into his

basket and throwing his shirt on top to cover it. He took his prize through a wooded strip along the path that led to a brush covered hill, overlooking the high school practice field. There he made a seat for himself, invisible to them below, the school heroes and their coach, Mr. Pendilton, running and making their loud primordial sounds of aggression and combat.

Philip opened one of the beers. It was a good accidental choice, sixteen ounce bottles of Black Label. He did his beer contest trick, sucking down the first in a few gulps, and then doing the same to the second. The thoughts that had turned into a taunt in his brain slipped away like clothes, leaving him with a smooth naked mind. The people down below were little more than moving pictures, even Pendilton, a dancing grotesque that he could shut out by closing his eyes, or humming.

There were periodic whining sounds coming from the direction Philip was heading in, like giant bees or hornets. Philip could see in his mind, swarming and circling the world until he was dizzy. He forced his thought from this picture. Motorcycles. Down at the quarry. Philip stumbled up the path wider than he needed, now he could hear yelling, bravado and growlings, men with no restraint. And then at the edge of the quarry gleamed, a line of motorcycles, NSKKK emblazoned across gas tanks and saddlebags, Nazi Socialist Ku Klux Klan. The evil sounding club were in the water, splashing and acting like a swimming pool full of children. Philip dropped his basket on the ground. His initial reaction was to sneak away, go undetected back into a safe hovel or clearing where he could draw pen across paper, drink more, or wait with his nervous eyes until he could clam again at the ebbing tide. But he'd as much right here as anyone now. The alcohol in his blood heightened his spirit and pushed away his fear so that he

walked toward a spot between the motorcycles, where he could pass down to the water's edge. An unseen rock in his path caught his foot, and, his sense of balance already off, he lurched forward, landing with his full weight against one of the motorcycles. The bike teetered for a moment on its kick stand, but the gravel on the edge was loose and the motorcycle toppled into the quarry, sinking quickly into the dark. Philip landed on his stomach, his head positioned perfectly to see the machine disappear in the water below. He suppressed a laugh, but then his drunkenness released it, full, the way a worldly man will laugh, with a touch of bitterness, but childish, too, his pipes unworn, even with a head start on a life of self abuse. He laughed long, and hard, the way a fireman like Bud or Dane might let go over a dirty joke, or the put-on laugh that went with lewd suggestions of homosexuality that passed for wit around the station. But Philip's laugh was still different from all that. It was a lone laugh, the sound of someone gone beyond the distinction of sadness or happiness, despair or humor. Philip's laugh was the very point of a dense heavy iceberg of pure reaction. He stood, as if to beckon what was next.

The moment of shock had passed, and the men in the water were scrambling to get on shore and confront the vandal. One man led the pack, the owner of the bike. He screamed and cursed in what to Philip was a blur of sounds, but when he reached the ground, naked and threatening, the sounds and actions suddenly were locked into place. Philip's intoxication went from his mind like chalk wiped from a blackboard. The naked man was feet from him, and as he reached to capture, Philip fell back, fumbled in his basket on the ground and drew his clam fork like a sword from a scabbard. There was no time for the man to dodge the fork that swung and was buried deep into the front of his head. Philip pulled it

out, like yanking it from mud flat sand. The biker dropped straight to the ground.

Looking down at the bleeding eyeless figure, Philip thought of Pendilton and felt a strange satisfaction. The Klan converged, but Philip's senses were so excited that he swung the fork again, this time embedding it in the side of another man who fell, striking his hands spastically against the fork, his mouth opening and closing like a mute ventriloquist's dummy.

The brutal motorcycle club circled their fallen, and one scream, "Someone help, Someone, for God's sake, help us!" as Philip made his escape through the brush and woods.

It wasn't long before there were sirens, from two different directions, Thomaston and Rockland, Philip was taking a complicated path, taking a very long way back to Thomaston so he could travel through brush and unlit areas.

The parking lot behind the line of stores was deserted. Philip made it to his stand easily, even though he felt vulnerable and exposed across the short length of tar crossing to the shack. Inside, it was pitch black. There was no light coming in through the cracks, and Philip was sucked into a collage of pictures and actions. An etching of a blind man by Durer, the man Philip left punctured on the ground, Christ pierced in the side by a clam fork. Naked men assailed him, Pendilton, football practice, ducking Harold's powerful fist, and how he so craved it now.

The darkness wouldn't let Philip disappear. Rather, it focused him on the things he couldn't bear. When half the night was gone and he'd been sitting in his black hole, he pushed the plywood aside and slipped out. He pulled a loose brick from the curb and went to the front of the farthest store. The brick smashed the glass of the front door and set the alarm off. He went inside and came out

with two fifths of vodka. He ran along the trees on the side of the parking lot, darting across the exposed area and made it back into the stand just as a police siren split the air and car tires screeched nearby. There was the sound of another swinging through the parking lot and pulling up to the backside of the store Philip just broke into. The rotating blue light penetrated the stand. It made the blood that covered the front of his shirt look like ink. He opened one of the bottles and his brain greedily drank it in.

A day of light passed through the cracks. He saw its first rays and the blurred last. He talked to Dane for awhile, and then he was being shown around an art school by Bud's niece. She was very nice to him. He saw Harold, but only from a distance, and he was the size of an ant. Dane returned and said Philip could come and live with him and become a fireman if he wanted. Durer said he'd help him learn to fold a fire hose.

Dark came, Fog covered the ground. He vaguely recalled a road to Cushing, where the house was, going to collect the white walls, or the light from the kitchen. The fog was thick. By some streetlights, he could see it, white in front of him. He only knew he was on the road because he could feel the tar beneath his feet. One light cut through. Toward him. Some feeling, very bright, he was diving through air. Dark, quiet. Some time. Light again, crunch like eating fried clams, flight. Later, again. The fourth time, Philip was spread around too far to know.

Place of Business

He stood in the middle of the aisle. His blue short sleeve shirt hung loose, but wasn't long enough to cover the vertical crack down the middle between his shirt tails and pants. People behind him turned away, or tried to take another route since he was stopped in his tracks. He cradled a stack of books on his arm that had been on their way to a shelf when he saw the man, and the young girl he was talking to, now situated a few feet in front of him, ignorant of the nature of the fixed look that captured the man's daughter in an inner fantasy. Daniel's eyes ate up an inch of exposed midriff, then ran up and down the legs of the shorts clad pre-teen. He turned sideways to face a shelf while the man and daughter continued to talk low. Daniel shelved the books slowly, looking at the girl quickly and then, back to the shelf, in an attempt to instill doubt in the man's mind that the child was being ogled.

In the minutes that this act took, several of Daniel's employees saw what he was doing. They saw the important first mental evaluation and then, the slower, continued storage of the imagery that they knew would shortly send him home for the next few hours, thankfully, out of their hair, setting them free from watchfulness and other steady states of employment at this place.

It was a general bookstore. Their appeal had always been broad, but in more recent years, they had stressed young adult literature, even sponsoring an educational children's show on local television, to draw in more of that audience. Daniel had made young adult mark down his special project. He would draw youngsters in from far and wide to see his renowned one of a kind collection. Books of all variety, shapes and sizes, subjects, and when he thought about it, he thought, those youngsters of all variety, shapes, sizes being in those rooms,

standing, sitting, and now in this warm spring weather, revealing, innocently, exposing.

Still, he attempted to restrain himself to some degree. The public opinion didn't concern him as his past experience had taught him his money did raise him above the realities of the most common problems. And there had always been many new shoppers to replace the offended buyers who fell under his libidinous gaze, or victims of his temper, revealed randomly by the simplest event, like someone sitting in his way. What held him back was his shared ownership with a brother and an elderly mother, who still retained an amount of matriarchal power. His problems involving legal liabilities became theirs as well. He had a strong distaste for personal exposure before his family. Years before, he had been accused of sexually harassing an employee who subsequently left, and the department of labor attorney had forced him to reveal his sexuality in explicit terms in his mother's presence. The case was dropped only because the employee couldn't engage in the battle that the family was willing and financially able to wage in court.

So Daniel tried to remain within law on the surface, for no other reason than to avoid talking about sex with his mother. This left him merely a man uninclined to self restraint, who was likely to explode in emotional fits, and who would always find some means of satisfying frustrations on the one hundred odd people in his employment. Additionally, a lawyer was hired by the family as their business' CEO. The state this created at the job included perception that the family could do what it wanted, employees, expendable, and having no rights to retaliation even if tangible abuse was present.

Employees were gleaned from many places; though Daniel's final hand in all hiring made sure that there were plenty of child-like young women under his employment.

Unfortunately for Daniel, and the objects of his lust, not to speak of the many victims of consequent frustrations, Daniel was grotesque to the opposite sex of any age. He stood over six feet and was barrel chested and bellied. When he walked, he appeared to fall forward and seemed to propel his bulk in this way. His lower jaw jutted out beyond the upper, and his black hair was shaved too close on the back of his head, making his upper part look like it tapered to a point. His voice was high and child-like though he was over forty years old, and when he spoke, his s became th, though when angered, he could holler like an animal in a voice both deep and loud. He was strangely shameless about his appearance. A new employee had seen him come in one hot summer day and made a comment to another about him wearing a wool sweater when it was so hot. The seasoned employee was perplexed until she saw him and understood the newcomer's mistake. Daniel wasn't wearing a sweater at all. In fact, he wasn't wearing a shirt.

And now, Daniel was lumbering, back and forth, finding something to do elsewhere, then working his way back to the young girl and her father. "Can I help you?" the father finally said, aware at last that his daughter was being stalked right in front of him.

"No, I say that."

"I'm sorry?"

"No, I say, 'can I help you.' This is my store. I say that. You're in my store."

He stumbled forward. The man quickly stepped in front of his daughter, naturally, protectively.

"Do you want me to call the police?"

"You're in my store. You can leave if you want."

The man was shocked, but managed to stay clearheaded and pushed his daughter in the direction of the exit, himself following. "You'll hear about this!"

"Yeah, yeah," Daniel said. "Leave your daughter," under his breath, for his own benefit and a few customers near by. He sighed a deep, angry sigh that resolved in a growl. His excitement had left him. He was just in a bad mood now. Watchful employees regretted this outcome. Daniel'd be staying now, no tension free afternoon. By the same token, another person had been exposed to the nastiness of this "charming" eccentric family, that ran this famed giant mom and pop shop of bookstores; another person who knew what employees tolerated, for what that was worth. They slunk away to overstock spaces and carts of books, vengeful vipers.

Jake sorted books in the warehouse adjoining the store. Daniel lumbered in looking at what Jake was doing, and made his sigh, signaling Jake had better inquire, "what's up, Dan?"

"Oh, some ath-hole didn't like me working around him. He thought I wath thtarring at hith daughter."

"You wouldn't being doing that, would you?" Jake knew Daniel loved it when he joked with him about his young interests.

"She wath pretty tasthty." Daniel swayed his hips.

"You dog, you," Jake said in his southern drawl. He served a purpose better than any other employee. He could placate Daniel. Whither it was confiding about an attractive child, liberal politics, or employee bashing, or folk music. More than once he'd smoothed out Daniel's emotions, so that other employees didn't deal with the smoldering results. "Was she all in curls, like Shirley Temple?" He sorted out titles on the table. Daniel stood, pleased Jake was working even as he conversed with him.

"No. I don't go for her. She's too chubby."

"You like 'em thin."

"Yeah. Thin with thraight hair. All kindth, really. But I most like 'em thin but big tit-th. If you put a twelve year old body on a seventeen pair of tit-th, I'm happy."

"But you like 'em younger even..."

"I've been known to look..."

"You dirty dog!" They both laughed.

Daniel was diffused from the bad incident. "I've got a date thith weekend. I'm taking the niece of a book rep. To a folk conthert."

"Do you have her daddy's approval?"

"Oh, sheth looking for a job. Tho I suggested going to a show, and we could talk about the job."

"What she look like?"

"She's in high school, sheth probably seventeen, but she looks a lot younger." He laughed like a giggle. "And sheth got big tit-th."

"Oh, so that's it. She done bumped Shirley Temple out of line."

"Yeah, bathicly, sheth better than Shirley Temple."

"I'll have this skid of books done in fifteen minutes, then I'll move the truck around ' the port and get at the university press stuff."

"Exthellent." Daniel raised his hand and Jake high-fived him in the air. Jake was a fair manager, when he was there. Though he had a personal life, his wife was frequently out of the country visiting family. This gave Jake the extra time to placate, going to folk concerts with Daniel and so forth, and this extra was job security. When his wife was home, his hours and especially his outside activity were reduced. This was when Daniel would become upset. Someone else shared his little buddy.

"I have to meet with thome repth thith afternoon. lth in your handth."

Daniel stumbled walked off toward his desk in the shipping area of the store. Jake watched him disappear around the corner of the warehouse door and breathed more easily. If the rep. From S and S was coming, wearing something from her short wardrobe, Daniel'd be sure to be heading home for the rest of the day. She was thin and child-like.

Rick put his head into the men's room and saw the urinal and both stalls were unoccupied. He felt a fraction of glee, went into the farthest stall and sat down. An empty bathroom was a meditative place for him. He gathered himself, evened out his nervousness. He practiced the idea, and then the thought, of holding his head high. He was a man, of worldly experience, he'd even been in the military. He'd also been employed for ten years.

There was a tap at the door. There were three pots here. Everybody knew that. No one need knock. It came again, and then the door opened a crack. "Can I come in? Who's in here?" Nancy asked, her shaky voice not really asking but announcing.

"I'm in here, Nan. Someone's in here."

"Oh," wobbling indecisively for a moment, then coming in with a mop. "I've got two sons, you shouldn't mind," she said and swirled the mop underneath the stalls.

Rick lifted his legs as the filthy mophead ran over his shoes. "Ill be out in a second, just wait." He couldn't finish his business now anyway, he just wanted to get his underwear and pants up. He didn't feel shy as much as trapped and angry. "I'll be just a minute."

"No, just let me mop quick," stirring up and spreading the urine that had

trickled down from the broken stand-up.

There was no point. Nancy did what she wanted. Seventy-four, family matriarch, self medicating for asthma with steroids until insane, urine soaked mop wielding, rung it out in the sink with her bare hands.

Rick's meditation time was over. He had his pants up, the stall door open, passed Nancy, out the door, behind him hearing, "you can pee, don't let me interrupt you" in a steroid cracked voice.

Susan shifted, uncomfortable in the metal chair she was sitting in. "This is a list of our new releases this month..." Her movement was further limited by the angle Daniel sat at, leaning back in his low padded chair, prepared to catch a glimpse looking along and upward. "There are some reissues of titles that did well when first run..."

His mouth hung partly open, lower jaw jutted outward, head back, eyes darting from list to legs... "yeah, yeth, yeah..."

"We expect a lot from the titles I've highlighted, they've gotten advance reviews that were glowing, and particularly this author's earlier work, you might want case quantity on all of these."

"Yeth." Daniel closed his mouth, but opened it as breathing through his nose revealed the extent to which he was excited. He'd caught a glimpse of panty between her thin legs.

Joan and Rick both got up from their desks, first one and then a moment later the other so not to make their abandonment too obvious to Susan. She was on good terms with them both, in the friendly way that reps. must be, but to Joan and Rick, she, as with anyone who worked here or came here, was on her own. They could smell Daniel, that ripe sweat uninhibited by deodorant, rolling off him in an

expectation, like an animal closing in on a diminutive mate. Joan and Rick made a quick eye contact, then severed it as they separated to different sections of the store. It wasn't something that could be verbalized. It went beyond a mere disgust. Susan didn't know as much about Daniel as they did. They were afraid that Daniel might lunge, and neither of them wanted to deal with having to pull him off, or have to strike him. They would lose their jobs. Better to just not be there if and when such things took place. And anyway, why should they risk livelihood? Let things happen, let the outside world know. Maybe then things would be different. These thoughts were embedded in impressions, and compulsion, like the urge to leave the shipping area. Egos would never let a mind think so directly of the realities of their predicament.

Daniel made it through his first meeting with difficulty. He'd leaked a little in his pants, though he wasn't concerned about the appearance. He just wanted to finish up. He looked at the clock on the wall. He could make a rep. wait. They were on his time anyway. He left the building and drove home. He'd left the front door open, like he usually did. He thought back on when he'd had Lucy, a Doberman he'd bought to impress a teen. He'd let Lucy run loose in the house while he was gone. No one would have been able to steal anything. When he'd come home, he'd put her in a cage in the basement. He didn't really like animals. She'd died after a couple of years. Kept in the cage and largely neglected, she developed a fatal stomach ulcer. When she died, he told everyone he felt free. He didn't need to remember to feed it anymore. But he couldn't get out of the habit of leaving the door unlocked. He was still daring someone to rob him.

Daniel went through his front door and to his bedroom, first doorway off of the inside hall. He could barely wait to get his pants down and himself out. He

closed his eyes and started grinding and groaning to his hand. As Daniel rapidly found the spot, Tim happened on him, looking for a moment, then continuing to his own room up the hall, nervously closing the door and putting his hands over his ears as the moans heightened, unaffected by his presence in the house. Tim was a diminutive, slumped, bearded angry man who'd come to work at the store some few years before and had settled into his own pattern of problem making. At one point needing housing, Daniel had rented him a room in this spacious house, at a high though for this area not an uncompetitive price. Tim thought he was receiving a favor, despite the fact that it was a single room, and Daniel's presence was literally spattered all over the rest of the house. Tim would never have been able to move into this kind of safe, affluent neighborhood on his own, with his limited references, and meager means. Daniel'd gotten himself a houseboy who paid him. Tim pressed his hands harder over his ears and thought bitterly of himself.

The moaning reached a climax and ceased. Tim uncapped his ears and waited until he heard Daniel leave his room, then running by without looking in, got out through the front door without seeing him. He'd forgotten why he'd come home.

Daniel stood at the top of the stairs that went into the basement. He let the door go. It struck him on the back of the head as it swung closed under its own weight. It didn't hurt. It'd been heavily padded for sound proofing, as had the basement ceiling and window openings. He turned on a light and went down. He'd proofed it years ago to attract rock bands to practice here, back when he'd tried to pick up girls in clubs. A couple of groups had used it, but he'd attached too many strings to its use.

The dog cage lined half the length of the basement on one side. Lucy'd died two years ago. He never planned to get another dog. Yet in the back of his mind, he thought that he could use the cage for something. Remembering the reps. he still had to meet with, he went up the stairs and shut out the light.

The parking lot was nearly full. That was something for the middle of the week, afternoon on a warm sunny day. With other bookstores buying from them wholesale, they were doing very well. Most important were the people, all the people, filling his store, all the little, female, people.

The meetings with the remaining two reps. went by annoyingly slow, though the actual time was not unusual. Daniel couldn't concentrate, and kept looking up at the little asses going by in the store. So many he wanted to follow, restock books around, maybe even bump against. But he was planted here listening and responding to the patter of gay male employees of publishers.

He was a millionaire, he should be out there in his store, doing what he wanted. The problem was, he didn't trust anyone to buy or do the responsible things. He'd read two books in the last three years, best sellers he talked about long after they were over. He had a half dozen PhDs and doctoral dropouts working for him. But he hated and mistrusted them with their education. No, he would order the books. He would buy what the rep. said. He smiled to himself when he thought about this. It was a tradeoff. A little of his time to look at catalogs, for the satisfaction of having a complete dominance over numerous overqualified laborers. And there was definitely a sexual feeling that went with that. Maybe he'd been a remedial student when he was in school. But look who was on top now. He was more important than any of his teachers. He'd even hired his speech

therapist who'd applied for part time work here, just so he could criticize her ability to do simple tasks, and fire her after a month of gradually increased torment. He was on top. He never dwelled on the fact that both his position and wealth were inherited. So what if they were? He deserved it by being born.

Daniel's mind wandered onto other forms of revenge that availed themselves to him here. On the occasion a job was vacated that was higher paying, the lawyer CEO would make known the opening. There were always a few of the overqualified employees who would generate a resume, their education and past achievements proudly displayed on heavy weight and expensive paper. They might even be met with briefly by the CEO who would say their application would be seriously considered. It would take weeks, making the most careful assessments for the important link on the chain. In that time several rumors would circulate. That was part of the cycle. Just when it looked like the position wasn't going to be filled at all, Daniel would step in and offer the job to someone in the company who hadn't even applied, typically someone not liked by other employees; young, perhaps just out of high school or a college dropout, with little or no work experience previous or obligations. The other prospective employees would be demoralized. The proud new holder of the position would struggle with something he could barely do, and be berated for his ineffectiveness. Then Daniel would cover the duties, outwardly exasperated and angry, inwardly gratified.

Daniel finished with the reps. He had almost no interest in, or memory of, what he'd bought. As Daniel stumbled out of the shipping area, Tim crossed his path carrying a small stack of paperbacks against his concave chest. Daniel's falling stride and Tim's jittering steps allowed them not to collide. Both careened to opposite sides then back on their tracks, then stopped.

“Hi, Tim,” soft high but evenly pitched, controlled.

“Hi, Danny,” stopping, looking at shoes, general, undirected, half-sneer, sad, uneven beard.

“Will you put the trash out tonight? I have something I have to do.”

“Sure.” Tim hated doing that. Daniel always made the bags very heavy. Tim’s stomach growled and he felt a little dizzy. That’s what he’d gone home for. To eat.

They continued on their ways. Daniel thought someday maybe he’d fire someone and give Tim a higher paying, more demanding job, just to upset other employees. Tim was disliked. He could be rude and condescending. He was small in stature, and a college dropout. When he was still new at his job, someone had made a mild tease like they did in the warehouse to pass the time. Tim had exploded, swearing and throwing a book which struck another worker. People were disturbed. Tim was anxious for his job. Daniel made sure nothing was done. He liked the tension.

It was crowded out in the store. Daniel moved about among people, watching, looking. He got low near the floor, but two people stood between him and his object. Up on a ladder, looking down a youngster’s loose top, a tall man stood next to the ladder and ruined his view. Daniel moved to another location in the store and experienced the same frustration.

Rick saw and cowered in an overstock area, avoiding conflict, avoiding acknowledgment. He had two kids of his own. They never visited him in the store. He never told them why. He never told himself why.

Daniel saw Rick and was annoyed. He was always hovering around when Daniel was looking. He finished straightening a row of books and stumbled

into the warehouse. Jake turned to see him, then looked back at his work on the sorting table.

"We've got some good markdown titles here, Danny. We are your university bookstore. If they weren't remainder marked, we could put them out with the new books."

"Yeah."

Daniel seemed uninterested, so Jake changed the topic. "There's some dandy young buds out in the store today, huh?"

"Bathicly, I think I want to fire Rick."

"What's the problem?"

"He just thinks around. And when he thees me he hides in overstock and tries to look busy."

"Oh, he thinks he's getting away with something, huh?" spoken in a light tone, trying to diffuse.

"Do me a favor. Watch his for me thith afternoon and thee if he doth a lick of work. I thuthspect he's not doing anything."

Jack sighed. "Okay Danny, I'll do that." Maybe he'd give Rick the heads up. He wasn't a bad fellow. Still, it was good if Daniel was focusing on someone. It meant everyone else became a conspirator, which for job security, was a good position to be in. He'd go loiter in the store for a few days, and tell Daniel that he was watching Rick. Maybe he'd make up something to say, like Rick spent too much time in the bathroom. If Daniel had some ammunition, he'd be happier.

"You off for the day, then?"

"Yeah. I have thome things to do. Thee ya tomorrow." Jake made the move and Daniel high-fived him in the air.

Tim slept fitfully. He often woke from dreams but stayed in that mid-state where images and sounds shifted by each other and seemed to enter the waking world. Tonight it was the sounds of heavy footsteps and hard breathing in the hall, a can clattering across a floor, and a moment later, a door opening and closing. Images of green ogres and childhood bullies spun from these disturbances, then subsided. Again, a sound disrupted the even flow of sleep. A crying child, then muffled noises as if blocked. A heavy grunting, and a door that opened and closed. Time awoke fully this time. The house was still. He got up and went to the kitchen, it was empty, quiet. Back down the hall, Daniel's door was open, the room, empty as well. Tim went back to his room.

Tim always tried to get out of the house fairly early. He was shyest in the morning, so he tried to avoid seeing Daniel at the house. Lately, Daniel had been leaving later, getting up had also been harder for Tim, who's sleeping was becoming increasingly static.

He showered and washed himself the way he dried his hands. He rasped instead of wiped, rapidly, and as hard as he could. His showers, including his hair, usually took three minutes, always under five. His intention was to get out of the vulnerable state of nudity as quickly as possible, to avoid interruptions and not to be seen nude. The only things on which he lingered were his face and beard; the face, how to hide it best, the beard, how to cultivate it into an imitation of Herman Melville, his idol, along with Richard Burton, both without a doubt intelligent men of the world. Before Tim left the bathroom, he made sure the bare spot below the left corner of his mouth was covered with the long whiskers of his mustache, and that the sparse area under his chin was

combed over.

At work he punched the time card and kept his eyes low, partly with his head tilted downward and partly with his neck curled forward. In this way he avoided hellos, going straight to work in overstock, where he finally hung his hat on a protruding nail.

Daniel went to work at eleven o'clock. He came in through the warehouse door and deposited a big paper bag of muffins and pastries on a book sorting desk. "Anyone who wants thome breakfast come and get it." He lumbered off into the store, smiling.

Jake took it in and filled a cup at the water cooler. The warehouse receiver and two laborers stood looking at each other, and suspiciously at the bag. "What gives?" Earle said, hands on hips, confused.

Jake went to the desk, pulled out a bran muffin and started eating it. "Seems fine."

Daniel returned to the warehouse after a quick look around the store. "I went by Roseth Bakery thith morning. The blueberry muffins are incredible." He took a bite out of one and put it back in the bag. "I need to take thome books from the children's room and put them in my truck. Will you boxth them up for me?"

"Sure, just bring them in." Daniel found a free cart and wheeled it into the store. "Something ain't right here," Earle said from over at the receiving bay.

"Look," Jake said, "don't question it. He's happy, he's out of our hair. Whatever he's up to, its good for us."

Out in the store, Rick was on a ladder, bringing down overstock to fill gaps on

the shelves below. Daniel came into the aisle, then stopped as there wasn't enough room for both cart and ladder. When Rick saw, he scrambled to put the books back, get down and collapse the ladder.

"No. Ith okay, I'll go around," Daniel submitted. "tho how are you today, Rick?"

"I'm okay, thanks, thanks for asking... Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm pretty good. Thith section lookth good. Good job. I'll go around."

"Thanks. See you later," still on the ladder watching the retreat. The shelf did look tighter. He felt uneasy, but at the same time, overly grateful. Then it occurred to him; Daniel must have someone in the store to focus on. There must be an employee who was getting all the energy. It would be easy to detect. He'd just keep his ears open. Daniel usually talked down his subjects openly, that was a part of it. Was it someone at the registers? Or in the paperback wing? It was strange to Rick, though. There was usually an element of hostility you could see in Daniel when he was so focused. Now he seemed pacified, as if he was authentically satisfied. Rick looked at himself for a moment. There was the perception of a father. That was satisfaction for Rick. Yet, these perceptions also told him something else, something he couldn't, and if he could, wouldn't form into verbal thought, not even in his mind.

"What do you think about these child disappearances lately? They say they think its one guy over the whole tri-state, maybe farther. Looking at old unsolved cases too." Earle asked from the loading dock.

"Yup, there are some real sickies out there," leaving a space for Daniel to join in, but he didn't. Jake knew he wouldn't.

Rick was pulling an armful of books down from a deep hole far up near the ceiling. He looked down from his perch. There was Jake, sorting books at his desk, Earle waiting for a truck, and Daniel standing in the center of the expansive bare cement floor, swaying a little at the hips, maybe even humming quietly with a folk song in his head. Rick wondered how safe his children were in the world. He thought, as he blew some dust off of a book jacket, that he might never be up to protecting them, even in the least. He wanted to join in the conversation, to respond to Earle honestly, like it was a serious question being asked. But he bit his lip. He was cautious about being perceived as critical. You never knew who you'd offend. He looked over again at Daniel.

See My Claw

The air is crisp. Its cold, but its comfortable. And its more. Its like an envelope around me. I'm having a Schlitz tall boy. That's a twenty-five ounce can of beer. Its a narrow cylinder that reminds me of a spent shell, like the 4-10 bird gun I used to have. And shot squirrels with. And target practiced with in desolate places, just like this. The air is crisp, but the beer is colder. And I think it drops my temperature lower so outside it seems less so. Its the same way with hot drinks in the heat. To me. But maybe I'm different from the rest.

Its dark. Nighttime. I'm alone, in the backyard of the house I live in. Yard. That's funny. Before the house was built, a century ago I think, this used to be a county jail. There are the cement blocks, rusted metal bars sticking in the air cropping up from the flat gravel and grass clumps like islands in a rough sea. They knocked the building down, but nothing ever grew here again. The big, circular clearing remains, cluttered with stone and iron, and the house sits at one edge of its periphery, connected to the world by a half mile dirt drive off a sparsely traveled tar road, the back way 'round the town. Beyond the clearing is dense woods. There are paths that weave around, connecting the wanderer to the civilization of an earlier time. These were "colonial acres." Old growth. Virgin trees.

The house has been here seventy years. Three generations of the Lisando family lived here before they sold the house for retirement to Florida, and the youngers, apartment living in various cities.

Each generation of Lisandos produced eight or nine children. It was a house, but not large enough to house those numbers. It was well worn by the end of seventy years steady, close quartered living. When I moved in, it was

almost uninhabitable.

The new owner was a retired Gulf Oil sales representative, “laid off” one month before he was eligible for a full retirement package large companies so frequently boast of as incentive to commit long term. That’s what his son, Alvin, said. His dad, Calvin Ailo, just turned flaccid and uncritical. After being one of the nastiest drunks I ever met. He went limp. Alvin and I would go to visit him sometimes. Alvin seemed to like to show his conservative, crest-fallen dad as an example of selling out to a steady pay check and security. Alvin was an artist. I met him when we were both in school. He was an angry person. Like his father was once. Except Alvin never caved in. To cut his hair short. Or want normal things. That’s how Alvin dramatized himself, readily and frequently after a couple of drinks. He’d gorge on self aggrandizing and elaborate flourishes of defensive narrative that bordered on paranoia the looser he got. But he was a lot of fun. He’d do crazy, daring things, like climb a radio tower during a lightning storm, or row a dory out to an island at three in the morning in the fog with a case of beer. Alvin could be loud, obnoxious, argumentative, but people liked him. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade. He worked, learned carpentry, plumbing, house painting and welding before he decided to get his GED and enrolled in art school. He knew how to do a lot of things. He was very useful to people. He made friends who respected his practical skills. After art school, they gravitated toward him. With no intention to, he came to be the hub of communal living, renting apartments and giving rooms up temporarily to former classmates without jobs or rents. His apartments were always overcrowded, so it looked like a good opportunity when his father, in an attempt to lift himself from

depression, decided to rent a small gas stop, and buy a fix-it-up house with the intention of renting it out. Alvin's idea was his crowd would move in and pay no or little rent, in exchange for renovations. Alvin inspected the property. It'd take a lot of work, including correcting badly done construction when it was built. He could move in and begin right away. The commune of Falmouth, Maine was born.

What a time. Lots of drinking beer.. Accidents. Work. We dug up and put in new sewer pipe to the cesspool, replaced all the interior walls, including some of the studs which in some cases were piecemeal inside supporting walls. The Lisandos were lucky the roof never fell down on them. The place was filled with plaster dust and who knows what else. Sometimes we slept with respirators on. Once, a roof panel slid out. Dust from decades poured out of the crawl-space and made a heavy cloud in the room, marbles rolled out of the ceiling and bounced across the floor, and there was the tinkle of bones. The better part of a human hand. In the eaves of the attic we found old whiskey bottles. We imagined a lot, but we were sure nothing could be stranger than what actually must have happened. A lost hand? Evidence of a severe secret drinker, maybe confined to an attic. We decided to let it go. Attention to that sort of thing could get the house really torn apart. We kept the hand in a jar on a table for awhile, and that seemed unsafe. We buried it in the woods, just outside the clearing. Perhaps a dog would dig it up and carry it home.

There was a group of ten people living there, plus or minus one at any given time. Besides the work in the house, we all had jobs. There was a sail loft nearby a couple worked in. A Coke plant. That employed a couple. I worked on the docks. That was hard. It took up most of my energy. Our house of former art students tried to sustain their creative momentum. We even held weekly critiques of our artwork.

It was what kept most working. But the work wasn't for the world. It was directed at supportive and encouraging friends. The idea of showing artwork outside of the household was becoming an unlikely possibility. Incentive eventually evaporated. James and Ellen had a baby. Their priorities changed. I remember becoming removed from them as housemates. And they were thinking of moving out. Alvin badmouthed them behind their backs. He thought they were giving up to do what every other slob did. But Alvin wasn't making art either.

While all my housemates backslid and agonized in turn about the fate of their calling in their lives, I quietly puttered in my room in free time, like I've always done, cutting up different materials and slapping some paint and medium around like I didn't care what I did. The others never took me seriously. I could tell they thought me the least likely to do anything with myself. I was taking music classes at the school where I met them, and I didn't graduate. Why would they think I was one of them, a painter, a sculptor, an artist?

There were usually art magazines laying around in the house. I noticed three or four artists whose work I liked. All showed with the same gallery. Finishing up some paintings I was making with canvas and rubber tubing, I took slides of them in the sunlight and sent them off to the gallery in N.Y.

You think that no one looks at slides, or you have to know someone. Felix gallery in Soho was looking for new artists after a string of successes. Sache and Sache purchased there, and their most popular artists held joint shows over at Leo's. This I found out later. It was interesting to get a call from N.Y. I realize now how my housemates must have hated, or at least, resented me. The untalented, the uninterested one, getting a call to come down to N.Y. And what followed, how can I not marvel, a magical blur. Heavily accented Romanian gallery owner

Felix, "I would like to handle your work, but you must move to N.Y. Talk to my director, she'll set you up with a realtor in nice artist area. In Brooklyn."

I moved down in days. Quickest move I ever made. It was like quitting a job. Housemates saw me off in a sort of confusion, in a way I think not envying me at all. I think it would have been traumatic for any of them. It'd have pulled them from a dream world, of a fantasy art success, recognition, all things partitioned safely into illusion. For me, it was just going with it. Chance to make money, moving for a better job. And I'd never really been wanted the way this gallery seemed to want me. So I said to myself, I'll do that.

Felix was an intriguing person. Late middle aged man, married, former Harvard Medical researcher, Romanian, American wife, former grade school teacher, now Felix smoked cigars wore Armani suits and rubbed elbows with Mary Boone, Castelli, not to speak of the downtown celebrities who frequented those circles; Willem Defoe, Lou Reed, Ginsberg. Lisa, Felix's wife always looked a little out of place, though she'd been in the game for years now. I could see Felix giving pep talks in my mind; "These people no better than you. Make conversation. Stop looking frightened."

Felix thought I was scared and green. It was all new to me. I just didn't know what people were talking about. One thing Felix said stuck with me. "Art is a commodity of the soul." I didn't exactly know what he meant. The context must have been stressing the importance of his role in the art process. "Spiritual broker" I thought later, but never said it. I didn't know but it might insult him. His truism popped into my head a lot, frequently when I was feeling sarcastic or cynical, when I felt like I was suppose to pitch something to a patron, which I suppose I began to resent, because they tended to resist parting with their money for my work. Felix gave me some room, but it felt strained when he said, "wall space

is money” and walked away.

I never signed a contract, but when the Art in America annual gallery listing came out, I was on the Felix gallery stable roster, and was listed individually in the artist listing in the back of the magazine. I suppose in some people’s minds, I had arrived. I had representation in a major, visible art gallery.

I got real involved in making things. I had a walk-up apartment in Brooklyn that I used like a garage. I nailed canvases to the floor, set things on fire, boiled tar, ignited plastic, in an effort to achieve some illusive effect that would keep Felix optimistic about the salability of my work. I dreaded what my landlord would think if he ever gained access here. I wondered what a recent acquaintance, Randy “Poop-Christ” Dioros’ landlord would think if he ever went into “Poops” apartment, with its trays of feces, piss and ejaculations of diarrhea. I’d never seen his apartment or studio. I’d have to ask him for a look sometime. By the time I met Poops, he’d started getting some money for his artwork. That only increased the death threats he received almost daily. But he was living the dream, making a living with his artwork. I was not. I took two jobs at bookstores and carpentry work as well, working cheap because I knew I didn’t know what I was doing. I worked seven days a week while attending openings and mingle-parties at night. I eventually realized that I was the only one living like this. Felix was getting annoyed at the lack of public interest in my work. To him, I was showing at his gallery rent free. A handful of sales encouraged him for awhile, but he soon slipped back into skepticism. For him, I went from “Uber-artist” to “No dice.”

Eventually, he called me in. “I’m sorry. I like your work myself. I don’t know what the problem is. Maybe you’re behind the times, maybe ahead. I’ll always look

at what you do. But I can't afford to keep you." And that was it. But, alright. I was already to pack it in. It wasn't working for him. It wasn't working for me. I thought about my old housemates. I wondered what they'd have done, or thought. I expected I would fall back on "artistic differences" as my reason for departure. But as it happened, my future wouldn't be such that any explanation was needed.

I found that most of what I possessed could fit into a van. Outside of the artwork I'd produced that is. Which I disposed of by snapping their support structures that made them large (art must be the size of a billboard to be a possible masterpiece) rolling and folding them into my van and dumping into dumpsters behind stores at night. In three loads, my artwork inventory had disappeared, the same work I'd put on gallery walls and priced at the healthy emerging artist cost of eight to ten thousand dollars a piece. In the trash. It felt very good. I was glad I still had jobs to pay my bills. I stopped going to openings at night. Instead, I made a cup of tea and sat in my street front window. I'd watch cars and people go by. I walked around during the weird local festivals. I looked at life in my Brooklyn neighborhood. I concluded that people were not the same everywhere. They were totally different. These people could have been ants, or buffaloes, with their strange religious parades and attitudes. The truth was it probably wasn't that strange. It was just that for the first time, I was noticing where I was.

When I was working at one of my bookstore jobs, Randy "Poop Christ" Dioro came in, walked up to the cash register and began asking where an Ethiopian Restaurant was located in the neighborhood. He didn't recognize me at first, but then stopped talking suddenly like he was shocked. I knew he was doing very well with Felix now, who'd loaned him out for a much publicized show at Mary Boone gallery. Though I told myself different, I was still taking notice of who was where

in the occasional magazine. He really was made. I broke the ice.

“Hi, Randy. Abyssinia is over on Atlantic, just up the street two blocks down on the right.”

“Um, right. How are you?”

I’m fine, thanks. How’s your show going?”

“Good. Good reviews.”

I didn’t even ask him about sales. The second question emerging artists ask each other regarding a show was, “did you sell anything?” I avoided Randy’s embarrassment of success. Everyone knew. There was a waiting list for his work.

Seeing Poop made me think of Candy Lick. Didn’t ever know his real name. Untalented, it seemed to me, Jewish, homosexual, and he made it work for him as a self mocking stereotype of his own invention. He wrote long tirades about being an unloved faggot Jew on kitchen plates, drew crude pictures of flowers on yellow lined paper then put them in frames from K-mart, blowing off the idea of artistry. He had friends take snapshots of him standing in his kitchen with his pants around his ankles, with a semi-erection. He clipped these photos onto his exhibition resume, and tacked them to the wall next to his real “work.” He was a Felix gallery discovery. He was on his way in when I was on my way out. When his sales finally started to slump, he changed his name from Candy Lick to Candy Lick Wanna Suck. It didn’t help his sales, but it made Felix hopeful for a little longer. Candy wanted it to last, but he knew it wouldn’t. He had sold himself as a phony, a joke he shared openly with his audience. But like velvet painting, in the end, it was still velvet painting. People eventually got tired of being reminded they were part of a sham. I spoke with Candy at an opening of his artwork once. Even when he was selling, he had no illusions. He knew he was a one trick horse.

He was surprised it'd gone on for as long as it had.

"My dad came down for my opening. That's him over there." He pointed out a middle aged balding man in a conservative looking suit, leaning on a cane with one hand and absently swishing his drink around with the other. He seemed bored and uncomfortable. "He took his time and walked through the whole show, watching other people looking at the work too. I think he felt ashamed of me. He came up after awhile and said, 'What are you going to do when this dries up? What are your plans?' Now, isn't that just like a parent?" Candy's tone was bitter, but then his expression softened. "Of course, the thing is, I didn't really have an answer."

He was eventually dropped. I never heard anything about him after that. I didn't see him listed on any rosters or see ads for shows he was in. Like me, he'd completely disappeared from radar.

"Well, thanks for the directions," Poops said.

"Yeah, just around the corner where Court meets Atlantic." I remember being almost pushy, like in my job capacity, being someone else. Not the artist with my name. I must have been trying to embarrass him. Now I can see I envied him. His surprise at finding me as a cashier stung, I know that. People like him didn't seem to have to work. I'd known a couple who'd come from Boston. They'd both sold some art through a N.Y. gallery while living in Boston. Their gallery director told them that'd have to move to N.Y. if they wanted to go the next leg. They moved. They lasted three months. Their art wasn't selling. It didn't occur to either one of them that they had to get jobs. They moved back to Boston, to their waiting condo. I met another guy who'd been in N.Y. for fifteen years trying to get his artwork shown. He was still optimistic. He'd seen some of my things at Felix gallery and left a calling card with his number. I called and we met at the gallery. I

talked mechanically about what I was doing as we stood in front of one of my pieces that was there on the wall. He didn't have any questions or opinions. I was on lunch break from one of my jobs and had to get back. I couldn't figure out what he wanted. It seemed that he was going through motions, making contacts, talking to me like he expected I was going to do something for him. He was doing what he needed to sustain his identity. But, that's just me, thinking.

It was hard saving money, but I managed somehow. After I was dropped from the gallery, the going out stopped, and that was a major savings. Though booze flowed like water at openings, it was easy to fall in the habit of preliminaries or nightcaps at a bar. Even when a tab was covered, the money seemed to disappear from my wallet.

Working days then nights spent in frugal entertainment at my apartment front window, I saved enough to move out of the city. I liked Brooklyn well enough, but it wasn't me. Neither was Manhattan. There were too many people. Too different. I would never understand it all. I wanted to go back to where I came from. I loaded the four hundred dollar telephone van I'd bought and drove away. I'd just been served to do jury duty in Manhattan. I didn't want to end up sitting months sequestered at some cannibal's trial. That's the kind of impression I'd have had before I'd moved to N.Y. And that's one I held when I left. Things there were extra, bigger, cruder. No one just killed any one in Manhattan. They ate them too. It was the perfect time for me to leave.

I drove back in one stretch, took me a day. I stayed a night in a motel outside of town. I'd lived for a month there once, paying by the week. The owner remembered me I know, because he gave me the same room. There was a restaurant next to it with a bar. I went in. The bartender remembered me too. He

smiled without acknowledging he knew me. But then he asked, "Pint of Porter and a shot?"

After that I called the number that I thought was the commune. It had been disconnected. I tried to get listings of the last names of old housemates. It'd only been a little over three years. It seemed like one or two of them would still be in the area. I had no luck. Finally, I called the number of Alvin's father, our landlord. The old man had had a stroke, but his wife filled me in on what'd happened at the house since I'd been gone.

Apparently, my leaving had angered the others. Two had moved to N.Y. Another had gone to Boston, cities where they'd feel they had a chance to make it big. The others had moved into other areas, following better employment. Alvin had gone on several hiking traveling sprees. He found himself in Mexico twice and twice been badly beaten and robbed while in a drunken stupor. He'd come back each time to convalesce, only to light out again as soon as he could get around on foot. They thought that he had met a girl in Texas and was living with her now. But they weren't sure at all. "Things can change suddenly and unexpectedly with Alvin, and they frequently do," his mother said with a bit of sadness. I'm sure she was implying, "he could be here for his father," but she held herself back. The house had been locked up. After Alvin Sr.'s stroke, she decided not to deal with tenants. But I was welcome to move back in, continue renovating. At a reasonable rent.

Work proved equally easy to find. The economy wasn't doing that great here, but I was helped along by circumstance and chance. Walking along the water front in town, looking for work lumping boats, a man bagging bait heard me as I asked on a wharf. He'd just lost a deck hand on his lobster boat and needed someone quick. If I could lump a boat, I could help pull traps. That was good enough for me too.

Plus two hundred and fifty dollars a week cash. His name was Shannon. I worked for him and his son, Tom.

I moved back into this house. Work started right away. In fact, I went out on the spot when he hired me. We fished six hundred traps in strings of ten. Shannon steered the boat, threatening, cursing, swearing, and working the crane. Tom pulled the traps up onto the edge of the boat, took the lobsters out, shoved it down the line to me, who jammed a bait pin through three rotted flounders, hooked it over the string, slid them into the trap, closed and secured the door, and pushed it overboard, next trap, going fast. I was used to fast and hard. Dock work was like this, emptying boats, and flooring for a scallop operation on Brown wharf, the same. Unloading trucks of scallop tubs, putting them on pallets, dragging six hundred pounds of weight across a floor with a meat hook, filling up empty scallop bins until the job was done. It doesn't sound like lobstering, but all the movements in the end lead to the same exhaustion. And hazards.

I didn't let myself have an opinion of Shannon, only flat, nonjudgmental observation. He was that volatile and severe a character. I felt that If I held some impression of him, he would sense it and it might put me in a dangerous situation, out there in a boat. The work day began at about quarter to four in the morning. I waited at the end of my dirt road and Shannon would drive by no later than four. If I was there he picked me up. If I wasn't, he'd said, he wouldn't even slow down, even if he saw me walking up the road. I cursed my van. It'd broken down the day I'd moved back to the house. One of the gears had gone, and I knew it'd cost some hundreds to fix it. So it sat. There was a bus a short walk away that went into town. I could get food. But no bus was running at four in the morning. I was beholding to Shannon.

The litany of curses on the world. The wife with cancer. Leaving nothing good behind when he'd die. He was a minister at his pulpit. Behind the wheel of his car.

I lodged myself away in the back of my head somewhere. Like going down a street everyday that's lined with billboards. Eventually you don't see them. But they're still there. You're somewhere else.

Fish juice, that is, the watery runoff from rotten fish bait is both corrosive and bacterial. If you have a scratch with even a hint of a scab, while you're working baiting traps, the salty juice from the fish will wash over the scab until it loosens or dissolves. When the scab is gone, the juice collects as a distillation of jelly in the pocket that remains, and is frequently rinsed out by the moving water, replaced by fresh slime. Between the movement of the water, which washes away the broken down skin, and the acidic quality of the juice, a scratch can become a deep, oozing crater that passes through every layer of skin and, hopefully, ends, somewhere below. If you're lucky, you'll heal with just a scar. But this isn't always what happens. A big crater through the flesh is a barn door for infection. And bacteria is the other destructive force of fish juice. The situation is a whole illness delivery system. I make myself laugh, trying to sound medical like that. Not the words, but I think probably the cadence I picked up when the doctors talked with me about blood poisoning.

Shannon was pleased with my working, over all. He almost marveled that the first weeks I worked, we were getting done early in the day, because I moved so fast. That's just the way I operated, when something was new to me. I'd thrown myself into it to do the best I could. Some fellow workers elsewhere had told me

to slow down, you can't keep it up, the pace, stop trying to make us look bad and so forth. But I couldn't help it. That's the way I was wired. I could see Tom looking at me with squinty eyes. Maybe he was a little pissed because now Shannon was talking about maybe adding a few more strings of traps in the water.

But after the first couple of weeks, I started to feel unwell. I couldn't quite put my finger on what was wrong. I felt weak all the time. Instead of going faster, I was slowing down on the job. We were finishing later and later in the day. Shannon said he didn't know why we were taking so much longer, then he'd glare at me and his son would too. I'd gotten a scratch just along my wrist. Over several days, it had deepened and widened. It wouldn't scab over, though it bled only a trickle. I noticed I had a dark line traveling up that arm that followed a vein. I knew that was a bad sign. I didn't do anything right away. I was afraid of losing work. No, more importantly, cautious about making my employer madder at me. Then one early morning I woke up, and I couldn't move my fingers on my opposite hand, they felt so stiff. I got my glasses on and looked at them. The fingers on my left hand were swollen to the size of cucumbers. I couldn't move them and they tingled. There was a black line that ran up my left arm and disappeared at the elbow. On my right arm, a dark line ran down from the elbow to approximately where that open sore was. I felt nausea.

I started walking toward the hospital in town. In two hours, I was at the emergency room. I felt like everything would be okay now. I didn't have to worry, it was out of my hands. I didn't have medical insurance, but they still saw me right away. It was a light morning for them. The doctor quickly determined it was blood poisoning. It'd traveled from the cut on my other arm, gone through my vascular system, including my heart, and materialized at the end of my other arm as infection.

He put a metal splint on me that extended from shoulder to fingers, and wrote a prescription for antibiotics and rest at home. Before I left, he pulled at my cuticles and pinched the ends of my fingers. Puss bled out. "See how the antibiotics work. Come back in a few days. And, oh, you're lucky to be alive."

By the time I got out of the hospital, the buses were running. I caught one to the end of my dirt road and went home. I couldn't sit well. Something felt off. I was never home at this hour and I didn't know what to do. I was supposed to rest, but I wasn't tired. I was anxious about standing Shannon up for work today. There was nowhere to call and explain. And I couldn't work around the house because of my immobilized arm. After laying down and getting up, then watching TV and turning it off, I walked out of the house and walked to the grocer's. I bought a twelve pack of beer. I never realized how much beer weighed until I had to carry them a mile without switching hands. By the time I got home, I was tired. I put the box in the refrigerator, taking two out first. I drained one quickly, and opened the second. By the time I had finished half of it, I'd fallen asleep in a chair.

The phone was ringing. I didn't know what time it was, but it woke me up. I didn't answer. It rang for quite awhile then stopped. I fell back to sleep. I woke again to the phone. I ignored it and it stopped. I don't know how many times this happened. It seemed like I was dreaming it though out the night.

I woke up the next morning, still sitting in the chair. My back hurt and my fingers pulsed so much it seemed like they had a heart of their own. I got up, took a beer out of the refrigerator, and washed down two antibiotics. I sat down again at the kitchen table and looked at my fingers. They were still swollen with

a tinge of blue. I squeezed the end of my middle finger and a stream of puss came out and dribbled onto the table. I squeezed the ring and the pinky to the same effect. I had a bad feeling. I drank the beer slowly all day to keep anesthetized as best I could. It also kept me from worrying too much about what might happen to me. I took some paper and pens out of an unpacked box and began to attempt to write with my right hand, difficult because I'm left handed, my afflicted one. As the alcohol loosened me up, I drew pictures. They were sloppy, undisciplined and bizarre. Eyes protruded, mouths spewed and gaped, limbs struggled to free themselves from bodies, bodies tried to lose rotting limbs. It seemed therapeutic and at worse, a harmless waste of time. And I made myself laugh. I passed the day like this, and when the beer was gone, I took out a half pint of Vodka I found in a cabinet. It might have been there since I left three years ago. I nursed some with water until the day was over.

The next day was Sunday. I lay in bed too long. I missed my pilling. I gave myself the antibiotics four hours late and felt guilty. I'd asked the doctor if I could still have a drink if I was taking the medication. He said it was no problem. I wondered, if something went wrong, if I could sue him. Then I realized how much in bad faith that would be. "A drink" didn't mean ten drinks a day. It wasn't his fault. Though I couldn't help it.

Some time late in the day there was a knock at the door. At first it was timid, but then more forceful. I stirred myself from a stupor and went to the door. Tom stood at the threshold, chest pushed forward, angry, ready. When I opened the door, I

thought I was in trouble. But then, he saw my arm was in a metal splint from shoulder to fingers. He withdrew his threatening way immediately. "Gee..." is what he said as he looked at me. I could tell he probably thought I had faked ill, but now he saw I really had some problem. His father had sent him. He was likely supposed to beat me to retaliate for fucking up his work, or maybe I misjudged them. But I saw him change at the door.

"Why didn't you call? You should have called."

"I was sick. I been real sick. I was out. I got blood poisoning. All of a sudden, the morning I didn't come in, I was at the hospital." I could see Tom get guilty of what he'd thought. I felt bad for him. But I let him feel it. "I'm sorry. I'm still sick." I was drunk. "I'll come to work as soon as I can, if you want me."

"Well, get better..." He was sincere.

"I'm really sorry I didn't call."

He came in and we had a couple beers together. He wasn't a bad fellow. I'd been cautious about him, thinking he was mistrustful and maybe dumb, but those impressions didn't matter today. He was sorry I was sick, and I felt like I'd screwed up their work. When he left, I thought that whatever happened, working with them had been smoothed over, I was on the in again. I'd still have work, when I was well enough.

I started feeling feverish. I had fragmentary thoughts like in a dream while I was awake. Within a few days, I went back to the doctor. My fingers were still swollen and throbbing. My whole body was starting to feel like that. Like it'd been invaded by sickness. The doctor used words like "become systemic" and others

to stress the significance that the infection had traveled from one side of my body to the other, how lucky I was, though I wasn't in the clear. It seemed like he was preparing me for something shocking. He squeezed my fingers and pushed back the cuticles. They bled puss for him. He frowned.

"You're taking your antibiotics as prescribed?"

"Yes. And resting."

"Let's give it a few more days to work." He rubbed his chin in a doctorly pose of thought. "If it isn't getting better, if the swelling isn't going down in three days, if it stays the same, or gets worse, come back in. And we'll take another course of action."

I liked the way that sounded so little that I didn't press to find out what this alternative might be. I left his office. I felt like I was wading through water. It was a physical sensation but I couldn't tell to what extent it was created by my emotional state. I didn't think in that complicated a way. It was like water.

Two, then three days were gone like moments. I knew it wasn't better. If anything it looked worse. I wanted to give it more time. I was afraid of that unclear alternative. I needed it to take care of itself. Each morning I woke up and looked at my hand, praying for a miraculous surprise. Each day I was freshly disappointed. Yet somehow I retained the magical thinking that if I waited long enough, it would just go away.

Then one morning I woke up to a different stabbing discomfort in my hand. I looked down at it, a thing attached but no longer a part of me, an enemy. My middle finger had deflated like a balloon, and the loose skin hung from the immobile

frozen finger bones. My ring and little finger were still swollen, and had a

bluish-green hue. And they smelled.

When the doctor saw the state I was in, he had me immediately checked into the hospital. I had the operation I'd feared, his alternative, the next morning.

I can't think about how much money I owe the hospital. I set up a payment plan with them and I've been whittling away at my debt a little at a time. And I'm working again. Shannon took me back. It was an adjustment at first, but I adapted and I think that if its possible, I work even faster than I did that first day, when I was complete. Maybe I'm streamlined, maybe what I got is better equipped for the job; an index and a thumb on the left hand. I don't miss the three other fingers now. I was more concerned before the operation, but now, a whole bundle of bothersome life decisions have been solved for me. I'd thought for instance I might go back to N.Y. and pursue an art career again someday. I'd toyed with taking up the classical guitar again too, which is what I'd gone to school to study. Whether I'd been delusional or not, they seemed like real possibilities to me. I'd been thinking these delusions, if that's what they were, might have been keeping me from living in the moment and enjoying my life just a bit more; little things that bring me joy now, like this cold tall boy I'm finishing up, this crisp, cold night, the stability of the granite slab I'm sitting on. I'm right where I should be. I'm working six long days a week on a boat, and doing well, happy to be what I am. And what am I? I'm a lobsterman. See my claw?

Art Culture and Friday Night

Charlie was helping Anderson pull his traps. Anderson hauled them from a skiff, one at a time. He didn't have a crane or hoist. His lobster boat had got a hole stove through it by a pipe that speared it when the packing plant caught on fire and exploded. His boat had been moored in the cove. Anderson'd walked down to the fire like everyone else, just in time to see the explosion, and to watch a thin metal line fall through the billow of smoke and impale his lobster boat, just like a dozen other boats that got damage that day by the falling debris. Now it sat in dry dock on his front lawn, waiting for him to patch it up. Maybe never seeing water again, the way Anderson got around to things.

Anderson was never drunk on the job, but he drank when he got home. Charlie got used to the smell of stale beer on Anderson's breath the way he knew the sardine smell that lingered on his mother from her years of working at the packing plant. Charlie had his own odor, of cut bait. Fish juice soaked into his calluses. Stuffing bait bags loosened up his hands, like putting oil on them every morning. But smells were nothing.

Lobstering off a skiff was hard, hauling everything by hand, no motorized crane to pull the traps.

"Hey don't tie that loose like that! What, d'you get liquored up last night?" Anderson grumbled accusingly.

"You're one to talk," Charlie answered back.

"I'm not paying you to fuck up. Get that trap up here." The water was choppy today. Anderson was running the motor and trying to keep the skiff in place, hovering like a helicopter. "I got rocks over this side. I run on em and scuttle us 'cause I'm waiting for you, you better swim for it. "Cause I'm gonna come after and hold you under till you drown!"

"I'm hurrying!" Charlie knew he'd been screwing up this week.

"Don't know what your problem is."

Charlie pulled hand over hand on the rope until he got the trap to the edge of the boat, then leaned over it, lifted it straight up with his right hand and into the skiff. Two large lobsters crowded the trap.

"You hear it?" Anderson's little game.

"Yeah, I heard it."

"You heard it?"

"And there they are!" pushing one overboard as Anderson ripped the boat away quickly from the underwater rock ledge they were above. He put his chin out and thrust his chest forward. Fellers down at Farmer's Breakfast says I'm crazy trying to fish outa ledges the way I do, but I never scuttled yet. And I'm always getting lobster, every trap." He yanked the throttle tight on the engine. "See, this way, you drop traps right in front a their doorstep. 'Cause they keep to ledges where there's lots a food for them to pick at. Course, I don't say much about that over at Farmer's. No need they know how to take food off my plate." He hawked and spit. "I'm the smarter one."

Sometimes If he could manage, Chuck watched Anderson while they worked together. Anderson's muscles moved with an anatomy and life their own, grown sinewy and strong with use, tight cables unlike the slugs that hung on bodybuilder's arms on TV. And Anderson, Christ, seventy if he was a day, liver spots and wrinkles as furrowed deep as a knife cuts. To people used to seeing strong, the TV way, old Anderson wouldn't be worth a second glance. But Chuck knew. He knew them worn bands of flesh were steel, them bones caked and hard from breaking. And his strong was more than muscle, it was intent, and purpose, with no room for doubt 'cause that

just slowed down your work. And it wasn't his thinking that made it so. Anderson's body knew it. You watched him work, and you knew.

Chuck would never cross Anderson. He would never swear, never say no, especially no. You could lip him, but you had to know when to stop. Anderson was his own man. He had his own rules, not the laws of others. Chuck knew he'd beaten someone to death once, years ago.

"What, you sleeping?" Anderson's gray circled mouth was pulled down in a sneer. "What, you a woman? Pull it up! Standing there like you was looking out a window with a apron on, washin dishes in a sink!"

"I heard it!" trying to shift away from the anger.

"You heard it?" Anderson fell into the game.

"I heard it!"

They finished up at five o'clock. It was more tiring without the other boat, with its crane. They'd pulled single traps that Anderson'd set after his lobster boat got speared. The strings of ten were pulled up with Jimmy Benner's help, an unlikely friend since Anderson'd punched him out over a difference down at Farmer's. Some people could swallow things like that. Anderson never could have asked for help. He'd have let his own traps sit and rot before he'd ask. But Benner'd come over to his house after the plant exploded and he'd heard about Anderson's boat. Right then he'd told Anderson, in front of the wife, that he'd pull up his traps for him so he wouldn't have to worry while his boat got patched up. That was a straight up guy. But then, to make an offer like that in front of the wife, what was he thinking? It didn't matter though. It wasn't to shame Anderson, Jimmy meant it. Chuck knew all about it from Jimmy's younger brother, Steven. Chuck had helped pull up those strings with Anderson, in Benner's boat, with Jimmy at the wheel.

It was Friday. Anderson paid Chuck one hundred dollars cash at the end of it. Not as much as he'd made pulling the ten stringers, but it was something. He was still living with his old mum, in the floor Mrs. Miller, the summer folk had paid for years ago because they were poor. He didn't need all that much to get by. Just some for food and some drinking money. Blake, Stoney and Therin met Chuck up the road as he walked home from the pier.

Charlie felt the money in his pocket. They were all excited about Friday like high school kids, though they were way past that, and Therin had dropped out of school after eighth grade. Charlie wished Anderson had given him smaller bills. They see his hundred dollar bill and think that they could spend it all. Then what would Charlie do 'till next week, and what could he tell his mum?

"Hey, Chuckie!" Blake slapped him on the back three times. "You ready to go?"

"Go where?" Charlie asked with a put on suspicion.

"You know, go!" Blake looked at Therin and Stoney's faces, then back to Charlie as they began to walk together in the direction from where they came. They all knew what "go" meant.

"You got some of your own money?" Why did he bother? He knew it was already as good as gone. Blake didn't say anything.

"I got money," Therin jumped in.

"Since when have you ever?" Charlie reached into his pocket again, just to double check, and felt the bill.

"I got money, fuck you." I was working on Mrs. Miller's house all week sheet rocking a addition her son started but didn't finish."

"What, like a porch?" Blake asked.

"Na, a greenhouse or something, off the back. He put up the frame, and I

just finished sheeting the inside. Half the walls is window, so it wasn't much, but I stretched it out. She bought some fancy five bills windows at Lumber Joes, and then she asks Jimmy for help and he cobbles a shack around it. She paid me a hundred dollar to finish up. And I'm painting all next week. That'll take a long time!"

"Is she back?" Blake asked.

"Back ta Florida?"

"No, is she here for the summer?"

"She's down ta Florida most now. 'Comes up here a few times this year. Her brother's sick down there, in the nursing home. He's something like ninety-six."

"The younger one, right?" Charlie laughed at his own joke. "Jesus, I always remember her old."

"She's death warmed over."

"Fuckin bag."

They walked silent for a few moments. They all owed her something. They resented her too. When they got nasty like this, the debt came up in each of their minds.

"So, you watchin her place?" Charlie asked.

"If you wanna call it that." Therin tried to think of somewhere else to steer the conversation.

"She pay you to watch it?"

"Yeah, she paid me."

"Separate from the sheet rocking?"

"Yeah." He could have lied, but he didn't. Having money was worth boasting about, but you could get taken advantage of, too. "She paid me some."

"Some." Charlie said it to sound skeptical.

"Yeah. Some." Therin got defensive. "A good sum if ya wanna know."

"Sure." Charlie was ribbing him now.

"Okay. I got an extra hundred bucks... a week!"

"Shit!" like Charlie won. "I knew you was gonna try to touch on me for money, and there you are rolling in it more than anyone! You were gonna hold out!"

Therin finally laughed like he'd been surpressing it. "I wasn't going to hold out for long."

"I'm set," Stoney said dead pan, and pulled out some rolled up bills. 'S my pot money."

"Selling joints?"

"Bunch of ones."

"Shit." He unrolled it. There were three or four twenties in the middle. "Like I said, I'm set." He took a pack of Marlboros out of his shirt pocket and stopped

walking to light one. The others stopped and waited.

Blake looked over at Charlie as they stood in a line across the crest of the road, Stoney striking his bic. "You must be set, working for Anderson the way you been."

Charlie rubbed his left shoulder, reminded of the work but a little for effect as well. "Yeah, I'm not bad. Hard though. I'm thinking a baiting bags down on Brown wharf instead, if Anderson don't get his lobster boat patched up and in the water. This fishing from a skiff sucks. No crane. I'm the crane! And a quarter the traps means less for me, too. I don't know, Anderson don't seem too interested. I think he'd rather just stay at home and pickle hisself. I mean, he works like a maniac, but he ain't fixing his boat. What you think is up with him?"

"You'll stink if you bait bags." Therin remembered.

“No. Really?”

“You stink anyways!”

“Yeah? At least its from honest working.” Stoney got his cigarette lit and they resumed moving forward, in a line across the road. “So I guess you gotta wallet full, Blake.”

“I’m okay.”

Everyone seemed to have cash. Mostly more than Charlie. There was no reason why he’d end up paying this time. He was feeling less tentative about the coming evening. A few scattered possibilities and plans shot through his mind, the mind that had been drawn low by the rest of his tired body.

“Blake, you got the keys to the cabin out on House Island, right? Got a tank a gas for the dory?”

“Why?”

“I was figuring, since it looks like we could make a night of it money wise, we go tank up and get wasted out there...”

“I don’t know. It could get choppy tonight. I don’t like being on the water fucked up.”

“Since when don’t you like a buzz anywhere anytime?”

“I just get a bad feeling fucked up on the water at night. We’re gettin a fog tonight, I feel it...anyways, I was just working out there, you think I wanna go hang out that old island if I don’t have to?”

It was getting dark as they walked without direction but toward the end of the peninsula, past the charred foundation of the sardine packing plant, and on to the general store on the wharf, where the ferry left four times a day for Monhegan Island.

“We can pick up some sixes at Martin’s, then decide what we’re doing. Maybe we go over to Stoney’s, see what Angela’s up to.” It was pointless to rib Stoney because he never got upset. But it was safe enough then too. Just to keep the bullshit going.

“Angee wouldn’t fuck you dirt bags with a stick,” he smirked. “Anyway, she’s going out with her girlfriend to the Black Pearl tonight. Gotta have her fun too. But I don’t wanna drink at my house. There’s dishes in the sink and shit.”

A breeze blew through their hair, and the air was getting moist. It was cool and refreshing. “Let’s stay outside somewheres for awhile. Let’s go drink somewheres like we did when we were kids.” Charlie didn’t want to go home either. In his case, he’d be waiting on his mother as she lay on her cot with her warmed up TV dinner on the tray in front of her, trying to chew with her teeth out in a glass, him, feeling oppressed by the blaring TV set at the foot of the cot, and the hospital smell her medicine made her body give off, filling the room that was never bright enough. “Let’s stay outside.”

“You wanna break windows too?” Stoney said sarcastically.

“Well, since your place is out...”

“Hey,” Therin interrupted. “Let’s go over to the library. We can go to the library.” They smiled. They all had memories of the library. They stopped in front of the general store.

“What and how much?”

“Cases.”

“Buds.”

“Black Label.”

“Colts. Colts, you shits.” Blake said insistently.

“Okay, Colts.” Charlie would have said Colts if he’d thought of it. He liked Buds, but Colt got you there faster. He was loosening up. It felt like it was going to be that kind of night.

“Yeah, Okay, Colts.” It was all the same to Therin. He’d rather be doing shots anyway.

“Colts’ good with me.” Stoney took another cigarette from the pack in his shirt.

“Not that I need permission.” Blake turned and walked toward the store, the others following, Stoney with the unlit butt dangling from his lower lip.

The bottles jangled together in the cardboard flats as they carried them up the road on the stretch to the library at the four way crossing. Only a few cars drove by, so and one slowed to look. Nothing was going on on a Friday night, but something going on was nothing special. It wouldn’t really be anything.

They reached the old library and went up on the porch, putting their cases down and resting, their asses against the rail, facing each other, two from either side. The library was painted an old-fashioned New England mud brown that looked the same in the light as it did in the dark. The front door leading from the open porch to the inside was boarded over with one big sheet of plywood, which was weathered and cracked with age. Charlie leaned over the railing as far as he could, and curled around to look at the window around the corner of the porch, on the side of the building. It was boarded up to, but the panel was cracked enough to see the glass below, and in through that, a shelf of dust covered books, edges against the wall and over the window inside.

“How long it been since we had a library anyway?” Charlie pulled himself back over the rail, rubbing his left arm, reminded by the exertion of the strain from earlier in the day.

Blake looked around at them. “I don’t much remember it ever being open.”

Therin laughed. “You wouldn’t know anyway. Have you ever read a book?”

“Fuck you. I read one once. It was a pretty long book, too.”

“Oh yeah? What was the name of it?”

“It was called... ‘Captain Bly.’ “

“Ha! I never heard of it. You just made that up!”

“I didn’t!” He couldn’t continue it. “Okay, its bullshit, I never read nothing.”

He reached down and took a beer from the top flat, opened it and sucked half down in a gulp.

“I remember it open,” Stoney said. “Must have been ten years ago. No one ever went in it. Just some queers. My dad said stay out of there ‘cause of the queers, so I sure never went in.” He squared his shoulders like he was uncomfortable and his face had a sour look. “Fuck queers and books.” He grabbed a beer himself and caught up to Blake.

“Still, its something,” Charlie said, “our town, not having a library, ten years. I mean, kids can’t get nowheres from here on their own. I mean, you remember how much we got at school. Imagine if no one ever got better than we got?”

They were all silent.

“So...” Therin started slowly, “you think you can get better on your own, and a library is gonna help...like until you’re old enough to drop out of school, like me?”

“Yeah, just like you.” Charlie opened a beer and flicked the cap at Therin.

"Come on, admit its stupid, a building full of books, boarded up like this forever. Maybe something in there change someone's life, you don't know."

"Yeah, I don't know but I wanna get drunk." Therin opened a bottle and chug-a-lugged the whole thing at once, slapping it finished done on the railing and letting out a sigh and a belch. "That's good, that's what I know."

"Yeah, well, fuck it." Charlie tipped his beer and caught up with little commitment.

"Aw, Charlie's upset," Blake taunted him. "Come on, drink up, you can do better than that."

"Okay, I can do as good as any of you." He finished the beer, opened another without pause and upended it until it was drained.

"Sounds like a contest to me." Blake finished his beer and put it on the railing as Stoney did the same. "Where are we?"

"Chuckie's one up on us," Therin said.

"Not fair! Blake popped three beers and handed them around. They all drank down the swill and threw their empties off the porch into the overgrowth.

"Remember we used to bring girls back there?" Blake looked at the other faces.

"Least, I did. Well, shit." He looked at Therin. "Remember, you and me both pawing what was her name, Sally out there and she got all crying, saying next time she'd blow both of us, remember? And she got scared and run off all bare titted. Think now, I bet she was a virgin, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, I think she was."

"Remember there was that picnic table out back?"

Little light reached the clearing behind the library, but putting down their beer cases on the table, they could see enough silhouette by the street light to

open beers and see who they talked to.

“The library was closed when we was fuckin around back here with Sally, right?” Therin spoke in Blake’s direction.

“Yeah, it was closed.”

The darkness let Charlie’s memories of this spot flow into him like light. First drunks, first girls, discovery and expanding his life in a narrow, small place. There, in daylight, sneaking away weekend afternoons, young hairless bodies studying each other, him and Angela, seeing what no one ever told them. Then again, just a few years passed, much difference. Her, all hot, riding him when he went in that time. That first sensation of it, and now a dwindling memory of details he thought he’d have forever. And of all things, to see Angela with Stoney now, living a life, settled for each other, no new memories for Charlie. Slim pickings ‘round here. He’d heard someone else say that once, “slim pickings,” true enough for him too.

“Hey! Race! Two beers!” Therin opened eight bottles and lined them up on the picnic table. In the dark he yelled, “drink!” and they all grabbed for the closest bottle on the table. The beers were quickly drunk, but in the dark, it was hard to see a winner. It was a challenge that was repeated several more times, each time tacking on another beer to the number. Finally, the frenzy subsided to a steady pace.

“Hey Charlie,” Blake slurred out suddenly. “What’s that with Anderson anyway? He still putting down a case of beer a night or what?”

“Oh,” Charlie didn’t know what to say about him. “He’s kinda funny.”

“Remember there, Andy, old Andy Wyeth painted him, right? He thinks he’s better than other people or something?”

"I don't know, maybe." Years back, Andy Wyeth had painted Anderson as a typical laborer, a painting now reproduced in books and so forth. Even Charlie knew about it.

"I seen Andy around. Him sitting on top of his jeep, painting a picture of an old anchor." Blake's voice was tinged with resentment.

"Yeah, well," Charlie fed it. "You know, he painted Eric out in the woods naked. 'Cause Eric had that long hair like a god or something."

"Never did Eric no good."

"Nope." Charlie finished his beer and chucked the bottle off to the side, opening another. "Andy said he'd pay for Eric's schooling anywhere he wanted to go. You know what he did? He went to Augusta Community College for a semester then dropped out. Now he thinks he's a big deal 'cause he went a semester to school."

"I bet he got a copy of a book that painting is in, and he keeps it open on a table in his house, so he can see himself when he walks by."

"Yeah." Charlie wasn't doubtful. "I went into Anderson's house once and there was beer cans everywhere except for in front of the TV set, and there, I swear to God, just like you was saying about Eric, there was that picture book and its laying open to the page that has Andy's painting of him on it. I swear, and you where just making fun."

"Yeah!" Blake was getting worked up. "Anderson, Eric, who's it going to be next? Who's life he gonna ruin now?"

"You know who that Andy is just like?" Therin forced in. "Mrs. Miller. Andy's

just like her. That old bitch. Thinking they're better'n everyone. First they help you out, and then they think you owe them... your life!"

"They'll ruin us if they have a chance!" Four drunk men's anger was filling the air. Each was beginning to envision their own enemies, personified by Andy the Artist, and Mrs. Miller, the philanthropist.

"You otta see how Mrs. Miller's son treats me. He comes to stay at her cottage when she's away, and he just expects me to pack up my tools and clear out. Don't even say hello to me. Like I'm dirt." Therin spit his words.

Charlie was quiet, but was seething inside as he thought about that apartment he shared with his mother. Yes. Mrs. Miller paid for it, but it was in a run down building, it was hot in summer, cold in winter, everything needed replacing. She wouldn't want anyone in her family to live in it. But it made her feel good as a handout!

"Remember Andy painted old Forrest Wall? The grave digger? How much you wanna bet he paid him squat? " Stoney hissed through his nose. "How much you think them paintings went for? Millions I bet!"

"Yeah. He got nerve," Therin said. "Then he goes and puts a painting up on the wall at Alvin's Grocery just to spite poor folks."

"What?"

"That painting up there now over the door? You didn't know that? That's an Andy painting."

"Them rocks and boats?"

"Yup."

"Well, fuck me!" Stoney really didn't know. "No, fuck him!" He stood up

suddenly, though nearly falling over. "Give me another one of them." He grabbed a bottle, opened it and sucked it down. "Let's go art dealing!"

They left the library with a mutual understanding of their intent. Their pockets jangled with the sounds of bottles bumping together. They drank the rest of the beer on the way to Alvin's Grocery on foot, getting drunker but more animated by the excitement of the adventure. Alvin's was closed, and the gravel parking lot was empty. The store was a hundred feet back from the road, and the nearest house was beyond sight. They reached the front door and Stoney tugged at it. "Yup. Locked." He drew back and kicked it hard once on the knob. The door swung open and banged against the wall inside. They charged in and turned around. There it was, hanging above the front door, a small dark rectangle. Therin found a milk crate, stood on it and pulled the painting off of the wall. They looked at it in the moonlight that came in through the doorway. Therin held it in front of him with mock delicacy. "Oh, why this must be an original Wyeth." He dropped it and caught it with his foot, which sent it flying out the open door into a puddle in the parking lot. "Goal!" he yelled.

They surrounded the puddle like thugs who had just beaten someone down. "He's not so great now." Therin spit at it.

"Wouldn't say so." Stoney pulled out and pissed on it in a big arch. When he was done, Charlie unzipped and did the same. Blake felt bettered, because he'd pissed on the way and couldn't now. "This isn't enough," he said.

"No, it ain't," Charlie agreed, finishing his piss.

"Hmm..." Blake struggled to think with a foggy mind. "...There's the Miller house..."

“Ah! Dried up old bitch!” Charlie said.

“Death warmed over!” Blake yelled, triumphant.

“Mrs. Miller’s in Florida,” Therin added.

“But the house ain’t.” Stoney took another cigarette from his shirt pocket.

“Let’s get out of here. Have some fun.” He went back into the store and grabbed two twelve-packs of Colts for the walk.

They drank and swaggered all the way to the end of the Peninsula, where Mrs. Miller’s summer cottage was, right at the tip, secluded, surrounded by trees and away from other houses.

“Ain’t I some fucked up,” Charlie kept repeating. He was. The more Charlie drank, the more he put on the local accent, slurring and drawing out syllables like he didn’t grow up speaking. Sometimes he fell into it without drink, but he always did when he drank. Eventually, he’d talk like that naturally. It was a local dialect. They sat on the steps and opened beers all around.

“I ain’t been this buzzed in awhile. Blake faded for a moment, then popped back. “Therin, you gotta key to this place, don’t you?”

“Ya, I got the key... just promise me one thing,” he drawled. “Don’t do nothing to the greenhouse. I put all that work in the greenhouse, don’t fuck up the greenhouse...”

“Okay, we won’t fuck up the greenhouse.”

Therin searched through his pockets found the key and gave it to Blake. Stoney laughed and kicked the door quickly three times and split it in two.

“Here’s your key,” Blake said and handed it back to Therin. Inside, they

threw the light switch nearest the door.

The house was filled with furniture Mrs. Miller had bought at antique auctions here and abroad. She'd been collecting for years; and every one of her several houses was furnished in the same way, a conglomerate of Early American, Baroque French and Victorian English styles. Overwhelmed by the antiquity and voluptuousness, Blake and Stoney stood dazed. Neither did Therin, who had been there many times to work, know where to begin being destructive. Finally, Charlie muttered, "ain't I some fucked up," and went to the only recognizable object in the room, a black and white TV set on a shelf, which he violently pulled from its wire moorings and threw across the room. It burst in glass and plastic pieces that rained down on the priceless things. But again, they stood and stared after the outbreak. When it seemed like the pause would never end, Therin stammered, "there's two chain saws in the tool shed."

There was a red canister of gas. They filled up the chain saws, went to opposite sides on the outside of the house, started them and began cutting. At first, they went left to right from the corners, going through everything, until they realized the spacing of the studs, and then work went much quicker just cutting the supports. They were spurred on by the noise they made, the whistling and the grinding and their drunkenness that filled the night air with a revolution from down below. For anyone to hear, it was just someone cutting firewood for their comfortable retreat, out here where the houses were all owned by out-of-staters. Nothing sounded too different or unusual, until perhaps there was a great whoosh and a crash and the chain saws stopped, and there was a pile of rubble with a roof on top of it on the ground.

Charlie, Therin, Blake and Stoney came around and stood beside each other,

wiping off the sweat and dust from their faces.

“We best get,” Stoney said through his gasps of breath.

“Yeah. Someone must have heard that, huh?” Therin threw his key on the pile.

“What’d the fuck we do?” Charlie said, like he was suddenly sober.

“Aw,” Blake said and punched Charlie’s arm. “Shit, we was just being men, that’s all,” and laughed, and it was infectious.

Spray

They pulled the truck into the gas station. Tom turned around in the passenger seat and looked through the back window of the cab to see the spray

turret clear the overhead canopy by inches. They never hit it. Al drove through spots like this without worrying or thinking about hitting or clearing. "We're not going to get hurt," he'd say. That was likely to be true. The truck was four and a half tons of workhorse, the hood and cab already skuffed and dented, the gears and engine tested by hauling weight, the axle and undercarriage by grating on the ground of backwoods roads and rocky hillsides, and perching on waterfront ledges. You wouldn't get hurt in this monster. But Tom still thought it was better to avoid potential problems they might cause themselves. Not that looking through the window was going to prevent a single thing from happening. He was still nervous from the time he'd gotten the truck stuck underneath a railroad crossing gate. He'd closed his eyes and waited. The horn blared as the train whizzed by a foot from the front of the truck. When he'd opened his eyes, he was still alive, the train disappearing around a bend. Off to one side a crowd of employees from a hardware store there stood and applauded him. They'd seen him get jammed up underneath the gate and came out to see what was going to happen. When the gate lifted, he drove away and hoped that no one called the landscaping company, the name of which was printed on the cab. No one did. He was glad of course. He needed the job. He never told anyone about it, not even Al. It'd been one of the few mornings he'd taken the truck out alone to gas up. What chance luck. He'd never have heard the end of it. But then, it probably wouldn't have happened with Al in the truck. Tom wouldn't have been as indecisive about trying to beat the train out. He'd have gunned it right away and gotten across the tracks, instead of hesitating, which was what got him stuck.

Al stopped the truck at a pump, kicked open his door and got out. He went to the front, popped the hood and checked the oil. "Down a thimble!" he yelled with

some satisfaction. Al put his head around the side of the hood. Tom gave him a mock thumbs up with his hand out the window. The light satire, the idea that these weren't their real jobs, that they were "spray men in disguise" made the time pass easier. Because, though some of this was a piece of cake, there was some that was not so good, for one thing, the nasty taste of that spray.

They finished gassing up and headed west. Tom looked at their spray jobs for the day on a clipboard while Al drove. He made a rough order based both on location and priority. He knew Goodill was really pushing to finish up spraying the town of Troyville. That was a big, single contract with the town, worth two hundred thousand dollars when it was completed. But Goodill had taken on other responsibilities too. Farms, private homes, woods, cabins. Any one who'd pay to have there trees sprayed for Gypsy Moth caterpillars could get it done by Goodill. Guaranteed effective. That was something other landscaping companies wouldn't do. Tom'd heard other spray men say it was impossible to guarantee. But Goodill did. And they never had to make a return trip. They did with one spraying what it took three trips to do by other spray men. Goodill always said, "spray is cheaper than gas." But everyone at this company knew it was the "special additive," the black drum they syphoned a gallon from in the locked up shed and poured into the bottom of the truck spray tank before they loaded up with Orthene and water. One old spray man who worked in the yard said it was concentrated, like cool-aid, and winked. They could only guess, but Al seemed to think it was likely DDT they'd bought from a warehouse somewhere. There was another shed that was always locked. Al said it was full of barrels of DDT. A lifetime supply. The Goodill silver bullet. Tom thought Al was probably right.

There were a few small jobs along the way to Troyville. They could do

them first, or at the end of the day. The weather was clear. It made sense to get some done now before they settled into that endless task that was spraying an entire town. Start the day out with a feeling of accomplishment instead of being overwhelmed.

“You prefer to do some these little jobs?”

Al nodded his head from side to side as he drove. “Donno.”

“Do you wanna do some small ones, then take early lunch, then just do Troyville straight through? To the end of the day?”

“You got the clipboard today. Up to you.”

“Whatever you want.”

“Pfff.” Al blew air through his teeth and slapped the wheel. “Just decide!”

“Okay, some small ones. Get us in the mood.”

“All right then! What’s first?”

“The Reeds. Twenty-seven Oak Knot Road,...” Tom pulled out his regional map and spread it on his lap. “That’s off 2, about four miles up on the left. Its right on Beaver Lake.”

“Job’s a job.”

“Says here Nancy Reed.”

“Yeah?” Al looked over at Tom then back to the road. “A lady.”

“Early morning, warm weather...”

“Maybe still in a thin night dress.”

“Hey. Remember that woman named Chase, over in Casco?”

“Do I. I’ve even had dreams.” Al began to laugh. That was a dream!”

“It was like the movie, what was it, the Graduate.”

“Didn’t get that far.”

"Yeah, well, it might have." Tom was quiet, picturing in his mind while Al laughed to himself. "See through night gown, sun going right through it."

"I think she might have wanted to give us more than iced tea."

"Remember what she said?"

"Yeah." Al nodded, opened and closed his mouth and took his time preparing his perfect mimicry. "Lets see. 'You boys sure do work hard. Like some iced tea? Say, that spray doesn't make you... you know, impotent or anything, does it?' "

"I can't believe she said that!" Tom hit the dash with his palm. "Remember how she sort of rubbed her legs together like a cricket, and arched her back, and..."

"Jesus Christ, I was there."

"Jeez though, why didn't one of us?"

Al looked over at Tom and smiled.

"There you go again, you always make like you went back there."

"I didn't say anything."

"But you were trying to make me think it!"

"Did no such thing. Okay, is that the road up ahead? Look at the map."

"Yeah, turn right here." Tom folded up the map and tucked it under the seat. "You know, we should swing through Casco sometime, just to check on our work. Of course we'd have to swing by the Chase house, look at her trees."

"Yeah. Pff. Trees." Al down shifted and the old engine whined as they were thrown forward in their seats. "Let's think about these trees." Tall oaks and elms lined the road on both sides. The mail boxes were numbered and momentarily they arrived at number twenty-seven. They turned onto a narrow dirt drive on the opposite side. Al drove slowly. Branches scraped along the side of the truck and

tank, and caught on the spray turret, snapping off as they went.

“This is going to be a tight fit.”

“Al shrugged. “We get as close as we can.”

The dirt drive opened up into a circular clearing. The tall trees on the edges enclosed it in a canopy of branches and leaves. In the center of the round was a cabin, constructed with raw timber and design that fit it naturally and unobtrusively into the environment. On one side the branches hung over Beaver Lake. Al pulled up close to the house and got out. Tom jumped down from the cab and walked around the back of the truck to inspect the tree damage. There were Gypsy Moth nests in nearly every one. It was an infestation. There was the sound of a door opening and a heavy set, elderly woman came out into the circle.

“Hey, why weren’t you here a week ago?” She wore a white night gown. Al suppressed a laugh. He turned away from her toward Tom and said below his breath, “She’s all yours.”

Tom stepped forward. “We’re very sorry. We’ve been backed up, this has been a big year for the caterpillar.”

“Jesus, tell me about it. Look at it here!” She circled an arm in the air. Another year of this and these trees are going to all die!”

“Well, mam, we’re here now. And we guarantee the work. We’re a little close to the water, though. We shouldn’t be spraying that strip of trees next to the shore. In fact, we’re supposed to be a minimum of two hundred feet from any body of water.” Tom glanced over at Al, who arched his eyebrows in bewilderment.

“What?” Her voice expressed panic. “My trees are dying!”

“I just don’t know how we can legally spray here at all. If our bosses found

out..." Tom could hear Al behind him, holding back a laugh. It was absurd, Goodill turning down money for anything. Tom diverted his mind from it so that he wouldn't laugh too.

"Look," she said, then paused before she began again, as if it were important, or she was hesitant for some other reason. "I try to live right. I recycle. Even got a natural compost outhouse." She paused again and it looked like she was chewing her lower lip. "I appreciate that you don't want to pollute. And I respect your company for going by the law. But I can't let these trees die. This was my..." she wiped a tear, "this was my husband's dream, to retire to this house that he designed, in this perfect nest we'd made... and now that he's gone, its all I have left."

"Mam,..."

"I'll pay you each fifty dollars cash to spray, and the check for your company."

Tom began to shake his head. "Mam, I can't..."

"Check for your company, and a hundred dollars cash each. And not a word to your boss, I promise."

Tom opened his mouth to speak, to stretch it out a little more, to say he just couldn't but instead he just nodded yes.

Al started up the truck and moved it to the central most and highest point in the clearing. The spray tank and machinery sat piggy back on the flatbed of the truck. The painted red tank was six feet high by twelve feet long, and seven feet wide. Full, the tank alone weighed close to two tons. On top of the tank was a spray turret that could spin in circles on a gas engine powered base, and move upward and downward. There was a tractor style seat on it, a steering wheel to turn and a gas pedal which controlled the moving speed. Tom climbed the metal ladder on the side of the truck and got into place on the turret. He turned the ignition on the dash, and the machine

revved up. He pulled the steering wheel toward him. This directed the spray nozzle upward, and tipped his seat in that direction as well. He put on the goggles that hung on the edge of his seat, looked at the treetops and pushed the spray pedal. A sixty foot arch of poison rose from the nozzle and rained on the undersides of some of the tree canopy. He tipped backward a little farther and increased pressure on the spray pedal. The arch rose higher, through and over the trees, and rained down on them from above. Tom tasted the first bitter drops on his lips. His first reaction was to spit, but within a few minutes, he'd be swallowing it as it came heavier on his face.

Tom sprayed until the trees around the circle were drenched, and spray ran rivulets on the ground, over the slight embankment and into the lake. Tom turned last to the trees that bordered the water. He soaked them thoroughly, rocking his turret back and forth, shooting way above the treetops so it would rain down, covering all the leaves. Large quantities of the spray went through openings and splashed like waterfalls into the lake. And so Tom was soaked with it too.

When the job was done, Mrs. Reed came out of her house and paid them just like she'd promised. Driving, Al looked at Tom and smiled.

"Jesus, you were a regular hustler."

"Yeah? Well I figured we could get something. I was thinking a good tip. I didn't really expect she'd put out like that."

"Do you want a paper towel? I put some more in the glove box."

"Naw, I'm alright." Tom sniffed and wiped his face on his sleeve. "I wonder how much of this shit we drink each day?"

"I don't think it matters."

“What if we’re making ourselves sick?”

“You can’t tell me you never ate anything people say is bad for you. And nothing happened. Come on. What was the worst thing you ever ate?”

Tom thought. “When I was seven or eight. I had this lead pipe I found in the shed. It was all dull and gray, but if you scratched it, it was all shiny underneath. So I... I used to chew on it to make it shine.”

“See? And nothing happened to you from that, right? And I bet most people think that’s a bad thing to do.”

“I hear you can get water on the brain and water on the knees, and probably something else.”

“Well, do you have anything like that wrong with you?”

“Not that I know of.”

“See? So you want to know what I used to do?”

“What?”

“I wanted to see what mercury was like, so I broke open a thermometer. It was so cool and heavy. I found two more thermometers in a drawer and broke them open too. I swished the mercury around in my mouth. I liked it under my tongue. I walked around with it in my mouth all day.”

“Woow. People say that’s bad for you.”

“That’s right. But it never hurt me.”

“The thing is, I read in a magazine. About some spray men in the sixties who who sprayed with DDT. Some people got really sick. And then the spray men had children with birth defects. The government built a town in Brazil and put the spray men there to study them. Its still there today. It like a big medical laboratory of birth defects.”

“You can’t believe everything you read. Keep that in mind. I heard once about some village that got started in South America by some crazy bitch, Elizabeth Nitty or Nitchy or some weird name, she had something to do with Hitler, but it was before he was even around. Anyway, they moved from Germany on a steam boat and went to live in the jungle to start the first Nazis. They got all inbred and they’re still there today, and they’ve all got wandering eye and droopy lips. Now that’s an interesting story but I’m sure its a crock of shit. Just like your spray man story. You got to look where this stuff comes from. Tell me you didn’t find that story in the Enquirer.”

“I don’t really remember.” Tom found the map in the cab door as Al down shifted to a stop at the sign back on the main road. Tom unfolded the map, and in a moment, pointed to the right. Al revved the engine and the truck lurched forward.

“Its going to be a little ways. A farm.” Tom looked out the window, houses slipping by like his thoughts. “Goodill, Goodill. What kind of a name is that?” Tom asked.”

“A funny one. Good,...ill... don’t you think so?”

“Yeah, but what is he? I mean, I don’t know how to say it.”

“Oh that. I bet he’s Jewish. What do you think?”

“I don’t know, I guess I thought he might be. I don’t know that many, so I don’t know how to tell them. But we met him through that Mark, right? And Mark’s one of them newborns, right?”

“Born-again you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, he is. Is he ever.”

“And Mark goes to the church Goodill goes to...”

“Yeah?”

“How come Mark goes to church with a Jew if he’s a Christian?”

“Its what they call a Universalist church, universal, everything. I read that’s what the word catholic used to mean too. Includes everyone. Universalist church lets everyone in. As long as they don’t contradict anyone or say one’s right and one’s wrong, they can go and think they’re religious. To me its kind of like that elevator music.”

“But I thought Jews was really tight about God and stuff.”

“Lets see...” Al rubbed his chin in a mock thoughtfulness. “What might a Jew be doing at a church like that... people going, hearing a preacher talk about all the stuff they might agree on, being fair, lying, honesty, so forth, good things. People who go there believe in being good. What a perfect place to do business. With people, like, aldermen, like, the mayor of Troyville. Yup, Goodill puts on his best clothes every Sunday and drums up work. That’s your answer; drumming up work, from people who are going to be trusting ‘cause they met him in church, people he can screw. And money’s his god. That’s Jewish. Al looked satisfied with himself and slowed at a stop sign.

“And his father started the landscaping company...”

“Started, ran it ‘till he died, had Malichi working there in the office, showed him how to keep track of money I guess. The old guys say he never raised a finger working in the yard, just holed up in the office like a little prince in his castle.”

“I don’t know much about those kind of people.”

“Not that many of ‘em settle around here. They’d have to drive a long ways to find a temple. But, like you see, any place they can do business will

suit some of them.” As far as Goodill goes, I figure the old man must have gypped someone somewheres else, so he came here to hide out, or he robbed someplace and had to go far away to use the money, see, that’s how he started a business.”

Tom looked at Al a little confused. “How come you know so much about Jewish people?”

“My uncle lived in Connecticut,” he started without a pause. “He bought and sold vending machines and juke boxes. He did a lot of business in N.Y. He said N.Y. was over run with Jews. He said there was more Jews than rats. He said they try to find ways to cheat you. But he was smart himself, and would always catch them. at it. You know what my uncle said the last time I saw him, just before he died? He said, ‘Al, never, ever, work for a Jew. That’s the way they’ll fuck you best. They’ll work at you and beat you down and before you know it, they’ll have you thinking they’re taking on a charity case. I seen it. Never work for a Jew.’ He had a friend he was in the service with. The fella came back and got working for a Jew. Here’s a guy who fought in the trenches, had it hard, saving the likes of these Kikes, comes back and gets a job from one who rags on him so much he starts drinking, and then he can’t stop. Before long, he was homeless, and finally he died, he froze to death. All because that Jew did what he did. You see, I think they do what they do for revenge. On the rest of the world. They hate people like you and me. Because they can’t help it. That’s the way they’re made. Just that simple.”

“So, how many Jews you known?”

“Really, just Goodill, but he fits what I hear elsewhere, and what my uncle told me too.” Al looked over at Tom and read the skepticism on his face. “Hey, you don’t

need to drink from the bottle to know its poison when its got a skull and crossbones on the label. Everyone knows what they're like." He laughed. "Anyway, that's what my uncle told me. Never work for a Jew. And look at me, working for a Jew!"

"So am I." Tom felt slightly defensive, but powerless against Al's argument.

"And you're just as fucked."

"Hey, what's with those hats? The little ones, like they was too cheap to buy a whole one? And I saw on some news once, where they do that chanting and rock back and forth and shit. Like they're Ray Charles!"

"Or like they gotta go to the bathroom!"

Tom was thinking about Ray Charles now. "Hey, when I was a little kid, I was watching the Glen Campbell show with my father and Ray Charles was on. Glen Campbell played a song with him, but Ray Charles was doing the singing. Part because he couldn't see what was going on maybe, but when they got to the end of the song, Ray Charles didn't stop. He just kept rocking back and forth and kept trying to sing. They had to go to a commercial so Glen Campbell kept trying to sing the last note and strum a finished chord on his guitar, but Ray Charles just kept rocking back and forth until they faded out and an ad came on. Dad said Ray Charles couldn't stop. He said it was just like his rocking back and forth. He couldn't help it. I remember thinking it was like going to the bathroom, like you said, going to the bathroom and you can't stop in the middle of pissing or shitting. So maybe the Jews and Ray Charles are just the same!"

Al laughed and nodded approval. "I think you might be right."

"Jeeze, I guess I do know a lot about Jews after all!"

“Yup, quite a lot.”

Tom pointed to a farm on the left hand side of the road. “I bet you that’s the place. Pull up here and check the name on the mailbox.”

Right away, Al got the truck stuck up to its axles in mud in the middle of the field. The wheels were spinning and then the whole thing just sank until it rested on the chassis. At first Al and Tom were sure that if they stepped out, they’d be sucked down too. But testing it with one foot, earth level with the cab, they saw their own weight wasn’t enough to make them sink. They cautiously rolled out onto the moist ground from both sides of the truck.

They’d been trying to get across to the line of trees on the other side of the field. The only other access was by a dirt path that had become a water filled trench. It seemed across the field itself was the safest alternative. The wind was against them; they would have had to snuggle up right under those trees to get to the tops. They definitely couldn’t reach them from where they were stuck. It’d been one of those judgment calls they were occasionally forced to make. In this case, they should have just driven away and left Mr. Farmer, which was his actual name, and who now stood to one side, Tom and Al watching him calling another landscape company to do the job and leaving Tom and Al pinned where they were. Stuck. Fucked.

Farmer called around trying to find a tow truck. Tom and Al were thankful. Neither of them had any idea how to go about pulling something like their spray truck out of a mire. Finally, an enormous caterpillar-like piece of farm equipment arrived and deftly crawled across the field to the sunken truck. For twenty

minutes the two machines rocked back and forth together, linked closely by heavy towing chain. Engine whined, mud flew, boards put behind the rocking wheels cracked with piercing explosions of sound. Then, like a tooth pulled loose with metal pliers, the caterpillar wrenched the truck out of the ground and dragged it corpse-like to the dry edge of the field. The driver climbed from the cab and jumped the five feet from the top of his tractor wheels to the ground in front of Al and Tom, who stood now chewing sprigs of grass and kicking clumps of dirt.

"You're gonna needs the underside looked at before you drive it. Ain't safe," the towman said. "So where you want it towed?"

"Flannigan's Garage, Casco," Al said. "Can we ride in it? We're stuck here."

"Sure."

The towman secured the front of the truck to the back of his tractor with two metal bars that took some of the weight and raised the front of the truck slightly, then ascended his cab and threw his rig into gear. Tom and Al scrambled up into their own, as the train jerked and then rumbled forward, from the dirt mound where they were at rest, onto the gravel and then the main road.

"Today's shot," Al said, putting his hands behind his head and sliding down in his seat, like he was being chauffeured.

"You think we could get fired?" Tom's voice revealed fear, and he regretted it as soon as he spoke. "I mean, If were gonna get shit, I'll just walk."

"Naw." Al reveal only indifference. He turned toward Tom to quick-study

his face. "Half way through Troyville, and these other jobs piling up? Goodill'd be

shooting himself in the head to can us. Imagine wasting time training someone now. They'd lose the contract for sure. Trees'd be gone by the time they got to them. Naw. Don't worry." He closed his eyes. "Tell me when we get there."

Tom still wasn't so sure. What training? They hadn't gotten any, really. An hour driving around the back of the company yard and a map of the region, and that was pretty much it. But maybe Al was right too. It'd be another thing to worry about to hire new people now. He let his mind wander onto other things as he watched the passing houses again through his window. All these people. Owning houses, land, trees. Trying to keep it all from falling apart. Painting, building, spraying, cutting. Tom understood some. He was all about preserving his job right now. How much of a jump was it to worrying about these accumulated things? Tom owned a weeks' change of clothes, some furniture odds and ends and some records all squished into a single room apartment. It was accumulated anew each time he moved. He always had the same amount of stuff. But it was never the same stuff. How like was he to those folks out his window? He didn't know. He could think about it though.

They were moving slowly. It took them forty minutes to get to the garage. Al woke up on his own as the train pulled into the lot.

There was a restaurant within walking distance that the mechanics said was inexpensive.

It wasn't crowded, which wasn't a good sign. But it was the middle of the day, mid week, and Al's comments about judging a restaurant by the parking lot were out of place. It was a truck stop. Food would be plain, in large portions. And cheap. The garage said three hours. There was a beer sign out front. So they'd eat, and then drink until the truck was ready. They had the week's petty cash for on the road lunch. That'd almost cover it.

A middle aged waitress seated them toward the back, against a wall where there was a large window. The view was over a short embankment beyond which a stream trickled. Tom and Al's eyes both scanned absently for gypsy moth caterpillar nests as the waitress stood, impatiently tapping her order pad with her ink pen.

"So would you like something?" She was looking at Tom, who started to speak, but quickly deferred to Al.

"Could we see menus?" Al said, turning from the window and sounding annoyed.

"Hey, you!" The voice came from across the room. Al ignored it, but Tom perked up and searched the room.

"Hah! Made you look. You must be guilty!" Two rival spray men sat at a table in a dim corner across the room. Paul and Tony had both worked for Goodill a couple of years before, but had been fired for developing their own accounts; offering to spray houses not on the list for under the table cash. Tom and Al knew this because they'd been used as examples of what you couldn't do out on the road. Paul pointed to the table. Al waved them over.

"So how's it over at Grady's?" There was no malice or sarcasm in Al's voice as he greeted them. Paul and Tony sat down comfortably like they were with old friends.

"Oh, you know," Paul said shrugging. "Drink spray."

"I'm drinking today," Tom interjected quickly.

"And I'm driving," Paul said, thinking to make it funny. "And wising to hell we was drunk!" They all laughed. " 'Course you two don't want to drink much, since you wake up with a hangover already."

Tom looked puzzled for a moment, but Al was already nodding knowingly.

"Yeah, the spray buzz. Thing is, you don't get high, just hung over."

"Well," Paul said, "we don't get that over at Grady's. Now its just a memory... from Goodill."

Tom was thinking how he'd felt that morning, and the morning before. In fact, he'd just gotten used to feeling sick when he woke up, and had forgotten it was unusual. Which it wasn't. Since Goodill.

"Hey!" Paul waved a hand in front of Tom's face. "You look like you're green in the gills right now!"

"Aw!" Tom shook his head, "you really think were getting poisoned working at Goodill?"

"I know what I'm having," Al interrupted and pushed the menu in front of Tom. "Don't get him all worried," he said to Paul and snapped his fingers in the air.

Their waitress emerged from behind the front register, intentionally walking slowly, her mouth curled in dislike.

"Number three, please," Al said shortly. "And a pint of Miller draft. Tom?"

"I'll have the same."

"We'll see who has or doesn't have a real hangover!"

The waitress rolled her eyes and walked toward the kitchen.

"You slob's got a permanent hangover's all I'm saying."

"Don't you have a tongue, Tony? What do you think?"

Tony looked across the table at Tom, then back at Al. "I think pushy guys like you like to drive, so me and Tom here end up doing most of the spraying!"

"Hey, I pull my weight!" Al said mock defensively, like he cared.

"Yeah, working for a well poisoner!" Tony spit heatedly. "I read up after I left . Funny, huh? Me reading a book? But you know what DDT does to you?"

Give you cancer, fuck up chromosomes, maybe you have retards!”

“Hey now,” Al said calmly. “We don’t know for a fact that’s what we’re spraying with.”

“Oh, come on. Black barrels locked up in the shed, additive they tell you, right? And you know, mixing stuff, that makes new stuff. They don’t even know what they’re spreading around.”

“Al said it was DDT,” Tom said to Tony.

“Al’s eyes darted. “I was just talking. And what if it is? You don’t think your kids aren’t gonna come out retarded any ways? What makes you think the stuff you spray with’s any better? They just call it organic, and come up with a new name and they’re in business. How they know what it does in the long run? No one knows, ‘cause its new. They let nature take her course, or history, ‘cause it was travelers brought the gypsy moth here, we’d all be a lot better. Let the trees die. But no, everyone’s gotta make a buck. Make everyone think its saving life, like a tree’s a starving kid or something. Guys like Goodill sweep in like bloodsuckers they are...aw!” Al stopped himself as other patrons turned around to look at him. “Can’t even tell the truth out loud anymore,” he said under his breath. The waitress came with their food and drinks.

“So we saw your rig at the garage up the road.” Paul changed the subject.

“What you do to it?”

“Got stuck in a field, had to have it towed,” Tom said, salting his fries.

“Underside caked up with mud, had to check it out for damage.”

“So you’re off today?”

“I guess so.” He filled his mouth with fries. “Be ready by closing time... eat and drink, for us.”

“We gotta chow down and get back to work. We’re doing return trips today. Gonna lose more business to you guys, I bet.” He made a clicking sound and pointed his finger like a gun at Al. “You with your silver bullet.” Paul and Tony got up, went back to their table to leave a stack of dollar bills and left the diner.

“Maybe the government could take us, put us up in Brazil, test us like they did the DDT spray men from the sixties.”

“Stop whining,” Al cut. “For one thing, no body sprays with DDT anymore. No one’s gonna learn anything new. If they could, who’d give a shit?” Get another job, or do this and shut up. You’re your own man. Sell yourself for whatever you can get. That’s the game. But stop the whining. No one owes you anything. And you don’t owe anyone anything either.”

Tom syphoned off a five gallon bucket of additive from the black drum, back at the yard the next morning. “Guess we gotta push to get Troysville done, eh?”

“Oh, same as always. That’s Goodill’s gravy.” Al took a sip from his styrofoam cup and studied the profile of Tom’s face. “Look, you take this stuff too seriously. This poisoning thing got stuck in your head just because of that magazine article you read, right? What if you’d never read it? Everything would still be alright, even if we are being poisoned, you know what I mean?” He waited for his words to sink in, but Tom just went on filling his bucket, his expression fixed. “Tell you what. Stop. Just stop.” He reached over and stilled Tom’s hand that worked the siphon pump, then pulled it away. He dumped out the rest of his coffee and pumped an inch of the additive into his cup. “Follow me.” Tom followed Al up to the company building, passed the unoccupied desks and went into Goodill’s office. “See here?” He tapped a coffee pot just inside the doorway that was freshly made. “Ed comes in every morning and makes this pot before

he goes on to the tree farm. Goodill's the only one who drinks it. Watch."

He took off the lid and poured the cup with the additive into the coffee pot.

"So there. We do that every day 'till the end of the season and Goodill will get just as sick as we ever will. Does that make you feel better?"

Tom grit his teeth and then gave a little, though uninhibited laugh.

"Yes."

"You know what?" Al slapped him on the back as they left the office.

"Me too! Now, let's go poison us some town!"

The Maker Boy

Todd spent the morning in his room, or in his lab, as he liked to call it. He'd been mixing chemicals he'd bought through the Edmund Scientific catalog, and heated these chemicals on his Bunsen burner. He was attracted by the color reactions, and smells that were nasty. When he achieved either, or both, he felt like he was on the way to an important discovery, the nature of which was just as fleeting as the mysterious events that were the pathway. He'd long since thrown the "Experimenter's Handbook" in the waste bin. The experiments given were unexciting and meaningless. They didn't add anything new to the world of knowledge. Todd set out on his own. The thought that he might stumble on a unique chemical combination or new compound became a driving force, as important to him as his animal experiments.

A discovery in his chemical studies would frequently lead to an interest in a biological application, hence sending him out quickly to find a subject in the nearby pond swamp or sewer. He could rely on frogs, though he never turned a snake, snapping turtle or salamander away. He would keep non-frogs as pets, they were such a novelty. The immediate supply of frogs would die of relatively natural causes; starvation, dehydration, in their holding cell, barrel or pit in the ground where Todd kept them once captured. But no matter, it didn't fare well for the frogs. If there were few in the ponds and other choice spots, it was because Todd had fished them out. If they were plentiful, they could expect to be taken prisoners and live out there lives in a hole, or expire on a tiny operating table.

Todd combined some chemicals over heat that fizzed, dissolved in the medium, and gave off a medicinal odor. He took it off the burner and let it cool. Shortly, it coagulated into a thick and slightly radiant paste. Intuition told him that this new substance required an application. He went down the stairs and looked into the kitchen. His mother was occupying herself with wiping the table. Outside, he saw

his father weeding in the garden. Todd walked up the road toward the swamp, which was on the left side, fed by a sewer from a line of houses on the right. It was at a good water level now. He could walk along clumps near the edge and catch frogs with his hands, while retaining a sure footing. A month before, it was flooded. The frogs were far away from where he could get. In a month from now, it'd be almost dried up and the frog would all have moved on to the sewer ditch that ran the length of the road. They'd be just as easy a catch there as here, but he'd come up with a handful of shit just as often as a frog.

Near the swamp, Todd heard the unmistakable sound of an air gun, and closer, the pierce of the pellets hitting water, then a muted tone as they hit flesh or bones. Todd saw Billy Cartwright as he stood up from his crouched position.

"Hi, Billy." Todd knew Billy from school in his class, but not to talk to really. Billy was one of the bad kids. His parents didn't go to church on Sunday and he didn't either. "What are you up to?" Todd was angry, inside. He didn't think he was going to get any frogs now. Not since Billy scared them away. But he wouldn't let on that he was angry. Billy was the kind, being a bad kid, who could hit you. "Doin' some hunting?"

"Yeah, I kilt two, see 'em floatin' belly up? And over there, kickin' in circles, see the splashin'? Got him in the head."

"Wow. You got him from a long ways away."

"Yup this is a powerful gun." Billy slapped the breach of it with his palm proudly and with respect. "Its a pump air gun. If you pump it hard enough its as powerful as a 22. I could kill a quail or a rabbit with it."

"Wow."

"You come out to get some frogs?"

"Nah, its all right..."

"Cause there here, just out in the water a ways. They all know I'm here."

He laughed. "You wanna shoot some with my gun?"

"No, no, I wanna get them alive."

"You gonna eat 'em?"

"I was going to experiment on them."

"Ex-per-ee-mint..."

"Yes. Do things with them, to study... to learn from them."

"Oh, torturing them!"

"No!" He caught himself sounding like he wanted to fight. He softened his voice. "Not torture. I dissect them to see how their parts work. I make them eat chemicals to see if I can improve them. If I can make them like super frogs, stronger, or with special powers, I can do that with people too!"

"Oh, I don't know.. I never heard of no one doing that."

"I have my own ideas." Todd felt like he'd talked too much. How would Billy understand what he wanted to do?

"Do you think you could make me stronger, have powers?"

"I think I could improve people someday like that."

"How soon?"

Todd felt trapped. He didn't have a real answer. But he didn't want anyone, not even bad kid Billy, to think he wasn't serious. "I'd have to test things out on animals all before I can graduate to humans. You can't just start experimenting on people."

"Why not?"

"Its dangerous."

"I ain't scared of nothin."

"Some things can hurt."

"I been hurt lots. Look!" He rolled up his sleeve and showed Todd a black bruise on his arm. "And look here!" He rotated his other arm and showed Todd a half dozen circular scars. "Don't think cigarettes don't hurt when you put 'em out like that." He leaned his gun against his leg and put both hands on his hips. "If you can make me so that Dad can't do that no more, you can experiment on me all you want."

Todd was silent while he considered the opportunity. He knew it wasn't one he could turn his nose up at. How many adults got that kind of chance? No one he'd heard about. He'd even read about a doctor in WWII who'd experimented on people and gotten in trouble! "I might be able to do something for you. I'll need to set up a place to work though. And figure out some kind of plan, a schedule. I do something to you, we have to wait and see what happens. It may take a while. Some things might not do anything."

"I'm all for it! My Dad? He's strong. When he's drinking? You don't know what he'll do. And he got powers too. Come on. Him and my uncle Jim is sitting out in the yard right now drinking beer. You'll see. He's got powers over plants, and weather and all sorts of stuff. Come on."

Todd was hesitant, but he resolved to have Billy as his willing subject. How quickly he'd changed from an object of fear to one of study, and a sort of partner too. They walked along the road together, Billy with his air gun slung over his shoulder like a soldier, and Todd, eyes watching the ground for insects or animals yet glancing admiringly at Billy. Yes, he could improve him, he was sure of it.

As they neared the house, with its hanging strips of siding and overgrown lawn, Todd's fear increased. Billy's father, Billy Sr. And uncle Jim sat in lawn chairs,

empty six pack rings and crumpled cans spread like crumbs around them.

“I see you been shooting frogs, boy.” Billy Sr. slurred and looked at Jim who laughed with a sneer that showed how drunk he was. “Why don’t you shoot us some supper? Like I’d trust you with a gun, even if you was growd up enough,” he answered himself.

Jim wiped his forehead, then dabbed his red face with his T shirt. “Sure got hot out here some quick.”

“It turned hot alright.” Billy Sr. looked up at the sky. ‘I’ll show God.” He raised one hand in the air and closed his eyes. He hiccuped twice. Suddenly a breeze stirred the tops of the trees off to one side of the house, and a cloud came across the sun and stopped. The air whistled in Todd’s ear canals. “Well then, that’s much better,” Billy Sr. said opening his eyes, throwing down his empty beer can and popping another.

“That’s a mite better,” Jim said. “Thanks, Billy.” He looked at Billy Jr. and Todd, winking. “You see how it is?” Jim nodded his head toward Billy. “He does that any time he wants.”

“I want something to look at!” Billy Sr. closed his eyes and waved his arm again in the air. In a moment, a flock of sparrows flew overhead. He opened his eyes and watched them pass, smiled and turned to Billy Jr. “Why don’t you mow the lawn today?”

“Gotta sharpen the blade.”

“Sharpen it then. Told you to cut the lawn yesterday.”

Todd put his hands in his pockets and looked at Billy, who like his father and his uncle, now seemed not to notice him. Todd was nervous around people drinking. Once, Kelly Bresenhan had thrown pebbles in his face, and when she ran and lost

her shoe, he'd taken it and thrown it in the sewer before she could get it. Her dad had seen it happen and came out of his house, Kelley's father, weaving where he stood and drunk, made Todd come into his house and put him at the top of the cellar stairs.

"You want me to kick you down there?" He'd said.

"No."

"How'd you like me to kick you down there?"

"I wouldn't."

"Maybe I kick you down the stairs and we call it even."

Just then, Kelley's mom came into the room. "David, what are you doing?" He turned around like he was caught, staggered back a step. Todd ran around him and out the front door.

That's what drinking did to people. Todd looked at Billy Sr. He knew he'd have to come up with some mighty invention to be able to pit Billy Jr. against this; the madness that the drinking brings, and the power over nature.

"I gotta go home," Todd said. "I'll see you maybe tomorrow."

"Yeah, tomorrow."

Todd walked backward up the drive until he reached the road, then scuffed along the shoulder as he went, expecting to maybe see a wild animal, or a lightning bolt, sent by Billy Sr. To pick him off before he got the chance to implement a plan to turn his own son into a super warrior who could destroy him.

Todd's father was still weeding in the garden when he got home. Inside, his mother was sitting at the kitchen table. Todd could see her from the foot of the stairs before going up to his lab. She had dug out his Ouija board again, by

herself, divining in the kitchen. He always wondered what she asked it. It seemed like every time she was alone in the house, when chores were done, she'd find it in his room and lose herself like this. It was fine. She didn't bother him. He went upstairs.

Todd looked at his cobbled together shelves of test tubes and science equipment. He could make a second lab out in the shed. That would be a treatment lab, where he could take Billy without bringing him into the house. Dad never used it, it was musty and unchanged from the day they'd moved in. There was a workbench he could set up like an operating table if he needed to. He'd move things out as he wanted them. But first he'd have to do some studying.

He unpacked cardboard boxes from the closet and took out textbooks, paperbacks and files. He found tape recordings he'd made when his parents took him to a lecture he'd wanted to hear on genetic research. At Jackson Labs. He'd been so interested, they'd let him stay all day while they took walks, vacationing. A scientist took him along to a research lab and had let him record his continuous monologue, as he examined slides and studied generations of mice. Todd had three ninety minute cassettes of what he revered as the voice of God. He put one in his cassette machine and punched play, reliving that day as he sorted through material in preparation for his project.

Todd found Billy the next day at the swamp. Billy had caught a frog and found a board with rusty nails in it. He'd pried the nails out of the board and now was driving them with a stone through the frogs fore and rear legs back into the board. The frog pulled and squirmed at his crucifixion, letting out a squeak but giving no signs of expiring. When Billy saw Todd, he threw the frog-board

down on a rock to boil in the sun. "Figured you come by here," Billy said.

"I thought we should talk about a plan." Todd's eyes flashed to the struggling frog, then back to Billy who in standing up obscured the view of the pathetic throws.

"I got some ideas from reading last night."

"Did you see how Dad was?"

"Yeah. I don't know how he can control nature like that."

"He always made the winds blow, sky cloud over, birds fly. He said he can make light bulbs explode, but he never done it for me to see. Said bulbs cost money."

"He has powers, that's for sure." Todd bit his lip like he'd seen on television for thinking. "We have to give you equal powers, better ones if you want to defeat him. I want to try some things like I been reading. Gotta tell ya some of what I might need to do will hurt."

"Like I said, hurt don't bother me. If I get some good outta hurt, I'll hurt forever. You do what you need to make me improved."

"One of my books says things about what it calls 'sympathetic magic.' Like a native puts a frog skin on a spear and that makes the spear move fast like a frog. Then in Frankenstein the monster was stitched up from ten men and had ten men's power."

"I seen that movie!"

"Yeah, it was a movie too. Then there's a book where a scientist takes a chemical and it turns him evil, but he's strong too, like we want you to be. I figure we can do some of all of that to you. I can stitch you up with some pieces of animals. Then you'll have their powers. And I can mix some medicines from the medicine cabinet with some strong smelling chemicals like I make in my

lab. That will make the medicine super powerful, and make you better than you were before.”

“Its like I can feel it already just thinking about it!” Billy puffed up and hit his chest with his closed fist. Nothin’ will stop me.”

“We can start as soon as we can get what they call donors. That is, what we’re going to take parts from. I want to use a frog, a snake, and a bird.”

Todd and Billy went in different directions around the parameter of the swamp, looking for their donors in the water and clumps of grass at the edge. In not long there was a splash and Billy yelled, “I got a big one! Big ol’ bullfrog!” They converged and examined the specimen.

“This will be perfect. See how strong and thick its hind legs are!” Todd took it gently from Billy and slipped it into a plastic bag he produced from his front pocket. “Now a snake!” Again they separated, poking around the drier ground, pulling up boards and tires and beating high grass with sticks. Todd and Billy both heard the sounds a snake makes gliding through the rough, but couldn’t see it.

Finally, Todd saw a dart of color slide between his feet where he was thrashing the brush. He dropped a foot on it and found a grip behind its head with his hand. He held it up in the air. “Snake! Snake!” It was a long, sleek Garter snake close to three feet in length and twisting powerfully to escape. “He’s lively!” Billy reached him a little winded from running, and in a special awe of the creature with which he would soon be sharing space.

“He’s a beauty, alright.” They gazed at it for a moment before securing it in its own bag and hitching it on Todd’s belt. Billy whistled like he was tired, but he was really too excited for that. “So if I can wing a bird with my air gun, we can get started

real soon, right?”

“I’d like to perform the first series of transplants today,” Todd said, liking the sound of it. “It will be followed by chemical treatments, but all will depend on what happens as we go.”

Todd went home with the snake and frog, while Billy went for his air gun and then to the line of trees behind his house to find a suitable bird.

Todd cleared off the workbench in the shed and pushed loose things on the floor against the walls. From the house he collected materials for his make shift lab and operatory. His mother cleaned in the kitchen, taking out baking trays from the oven and scrubbing them in the sink. His father sat on his black leather chair and watched a sports recap show. Todd climbed the stairs to his room and down several times, each time bringing a box of bottles and chemicals, then went out the front door, seemingly invisible. He unpacked and sorted on the workbench. Scalpels from frog dissection kits, various compounds from the Edmund Scientific catalog, beakers, test tubes, a microscope and a box of slides made up his lab inventory. He put the frog and snake in two large plastic buckets from the barn and watched the animals tire themselves out trying to escape. Then he checked to see if the light worked. The switch was stiff, but when he forced it up, the bare bulb hanging from the rafters flooded the room to its corners.

He organized needles, various lengths and thickness of thread, cloth, scissors and rubbing alcohol. Handling these things filled him with a sense of commitment to the task before him, and a certainty of its value.

The interior of the shed was dark brown raw boards, not stained, but aged. No sheet rock or insulation burdened the walls. The two by fours that formed the

framework entered the space, as did the nails, which Todd now found useful for holding boards which he jammed against them, making instant shelves for holding his lab supplies.

There was a knock on the old door. Todd pushed it open an inch to see Billy, standing with a flapping bird in one hand and his air gun in the other. Todd quickly ushered him in.

Billy leaned his gun on the bench and held the bird out. Todd took it from him and could feel the small heart beating rapidly through his fingers. He took a weight, a rock, and rested it on top of the bird on the bench. "Are you ready?"

"Go to work."

With some learned skill, Todd used a scalpel, razor and kitchen knife to remove the bird's wings, discarding the rest of it on the floor as it gasped silently. He defeathered and skinned the parts so that what remained was bone and muscle. Then he had Billy lay face down on the table without a shirt, and cut slits below both shoulder blades. He mopped the blood that oozed with an alcohol wet rag. Billy bit down on a piece of wood but didn't make a sound. Todd took the wing bones and muscles and carefully inserted them into the slits he'd made in Billy's back. Then he sewed the openings closed with needle and thread.

The frog was dissected and its hind legs removed. These were implanted into the backs of Billy's legs, pants hitched up to his knees. Sinew and musculature from the snake was placed and sewn into Billy's upper arms.

Last, Todd smeared a paste he'd made in his lab into the seams of the incisions. Billy winced at this, but didn't cry out or complain. The paste was thick and helped to stem the bleeding, though any other properties it might have were

unknown.

“I feel different.” Billy sat on the edge of the bench teetering a little, his body seeming to rock forward and back to the pounding of his heart.

“How do you feel different?” Todd took a clipboard of paper from a shelf and scribbled on it.

“I feel... powerful.” He slid off of the bench onto his feet, but found he needed to lean back so not to fall. “I feel like an animal about to come out o’ the egg.”

“Don’t show anyone. They’ll take you to a doctor and stop it.”

“We don’t go to no doctor unless mighty sick, like Ma got. And I ain’t sick. I’m better.” He made a fist but released it as a trickle of blood ran down his arm. Todd could see there was pain and that Billy was holding back a reaction. He scribbled again on the pad.

After a rest and a dizzy loss of the sense of time, Billy got up and stood. He went outside to the road and ran up it and down it, a hundred feet, then turning, trying out his new legs. At some points he seemed to hobble and almost fall, but he forced himself to continue. Todd watched him, remembering not long ago when he’d gotten a new pair of sneakers and tried them out in this same way. He remembered thinking they made him faster, and jump farther.

When Billy was done running, he squatted in the gravel on the shoulder. He was more than winded, and his socks were both wet with blood.

Todd worked in the laboratory in his room almost through the night. He was careful not to clink glass together, and unscrew caps gently so not to make noise and possibly wake his parents. He boiled mercury, oxidized iodine and joined it to vitamins

from the medicine cabinet, which he ground in his mortar and pestle. He pictured Billy, an object of creation, of his own invention, plucked from the hand of God. He wished he could have made him from scratch. But this was a beginning. Maybe there would be others. When there was a smell and a color that looked right, Todd turned off his burner and put the beaker of substance on a tray to cool. Billy would ingest this. To what end, Todd didn't know. He'd chosen the chemical components based on some aspect they displayed. Mercury was a metal, yet fast and slippery like a snake. Iodine would heal, the vitamins would fuel working and the grafting of the muscles and sinew spliced into Billy. Todd yawned. Having done what he'd set out to do this evening, he became aware of his fatigue, turned out his light and lay down on his bed until after dawn.

The next day, Todd walked like in a dream through the things that were unimportant to him. The presence of his parents, eating a breakfast, chores slipped by him with no influence. In the afternoon, his mother cleaned and father was out on business. Todd worked and waited in the shed laboratory, repeatedly holding the substance in the beaker he had made the previous night up to the light in the dirty glass window, striking a dramatic pose, like on the cover of a science book.

After the time they had agreed upon to meet, Billy rapped weakly on the door of the shed. He entered and Todd turned the switch, throwing the raw jaundiced light of the hanging bulb into Billy's discolored face. The rims of Billy's eyes were loose and red like he'd been bleeding tears, the skin of his face was shiny and opaque like melted skin-toned crayon. His mouth fluttered, anticipating

the effect before he spoke. "I'm feeling... strong. I can feel my...powers."

"How have you felt your powers?" Todd led him over to the bench and helped him jump up like a doctor with an ill patient.

Billy swallowed slowly. "I was at my house..." he swallowed again, like clearing or suppressing something. "...and I was coming out the front door... and then, I was at the end of the driveway, and I don't remember walking it so I must have jumped it without even thinking." He coughed and wiped some thick spit off his lips with his fist and knuckles. "And then, this afternoon, I felt really hot, but the sky was clouded over, and it was windy out, so I must be controlling the weather, too. I don't know how to change it back yet...I'm boiling up right now. Aren't you?"

"I can feel it too." He wanted to believe. He was actually cold. Todd rolled up Billy's sleeves and looked at the snake transplants. There were dark lines of veins running down both arms from where the implants had been made, and the wounds themselves were swollen and purple around the stitches, which were tight and cutting into the tissue because of the swelling. The paste Todd had smeared into the sewn gap was dotted with pores that had opened in its surface to pass the green puss that oozed and glistened on the skin. Todd felt the sleeve of the black T shirt. It was wet with puss. He held a plastic tub underneath it and wrung out some of the fluid for later study and use.

"The next step is to speed up the changes with a chemical I made." Todd produced his beaker of substance and held it to the light as he'd already done a hundred times. "This will raise your powers and fix you at their peak."

"Give it to me," Billy said like challenged, grabbed the beaker and swallowed

the liquid in a few gulps. He lowered the container, then placed it on the table at the end of a meandering search for the surface. His face was devoid of expression. Beads of perspiration formed on his cheeks, forehead and neck. For a moment he swayed on his feet, then found his legs. "I can feel the change. I'm almost ready. I can tell, I'm almost ready." He clenched his teeth together and his eyes bulged. "I'm strong! Ahhhh!" he yelled and flexed his muscles and arched his back.

"Yes!" dramatically. "You can defeat an army... the world!"

"I'm powerful!" Billy ran forward suddenly and struck out at the wall with a kick. His foot impaled itself on three protruding nails, but it didn't lessen his enthusiasms. He kicked the wall again and pulled his foot loose. "Nothing can stop me!" He swung to face Todd triumphantly. His eyes were irregular orbs now, blood vessels broke into red deltas and a thick congestion collected in their corners. "You made me God!" With that, he lunged to the door, flung it open and ran across the yard and up the street.

Todd walked outside and toward the road. He didn't intend to follow Billy. Billy was still a "bad kid," and Todd had no illusions, really, about controlling him. He wondered what the things he'd done to him were doing. Was Billy really changing in some miraculous way?

Later in the afternoon, Todd puttered in the shed laboratory, adding this with that, and making up simple imaginative diagrams in his notebook. The typical stillness of the country air was disturbed by the sound of a siren, first far away like a morning bird, then close, passing right by the house. It stopped a short distance away. Todd knew it was at Billy's house. He thought for a moment that Billy might have risen up and with his new super human fury, slain his father and his uncle, but he realized it was more likely that Billy had

become very ill from what he had done to him.

Failure was not defeat. Todd thought he could learn something from these efforts, though he didn't know what. He may have gone forward a little prematurely.